



Wrapped in a
cocoon of
passion
and lust—
she longed for
her lover and
he yearned
for

Erin's Ecstasy

BY
SYLVIE F. SOMMERFIELD

AGONY OR ECSTASY

Erin prayed that she could convince Charles Duggan that his devious plans of revenge against the Cannons were fruitless. He had to accept the fact that she was in love with another man.

"I'm to marry Mitchell Cannon next month," she bravely asserted.

"I think not, Erin," he chuckled as his eyes glowered with amusement. "These papers will undoubtedly cause the downfall of the Cannons—can you marry a man while he is in prison?"

"Those are lies, all lies!" she cried.

"You will either concede to my terms or your Cannons will suffer the consequences," Charles threatened as he forcefully pulled her toward him. She was helpless in his arms and although she struggled, she had not the strength to stop him from doing anything he wanted. With one angry tug, he tore open the buttons down the front of her dress and exposed her soft virginal skin. She begged him to stop but he was beyond hearing her now as he tore roughly at the remains of her clothes.

Erin thought sadly of her past happiness with the Cannons. It seemed as though her world had suddenly ended and she had no choice but to give in to Charles' evil demands . . .

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Chapter 1

Erin Murry stood very still holding her brother Sean's hand as tightly as possible. The dark shawl covering her head was damp from the early morning drizzle, as was the rest of her. She could not remember a time when she had felt worse. Outside of the physical exhaustion, there was a feeling of emotional drain that left her unable to gather her scattered thoughts together in one piece. Chaotic ideas scrambled about in

her head so she could barely concentrate. A desperate desire to cry lingered on the edge of her consciousness, and she had to exert a controlled effort to swallow the lump in her throat which threatened to cut off her breath.

Erin Murry felt she was not a very beautiful sight at the moment. In fact, at any given time, she felt she was not beautiful. She was too thin in the first place, and her complexion, being very white, contrasted sharply with the deep, midnight black of her hair. Anyone looking at Erin would never be attracted, she thought, by any of her physical qualities. And yet, she possessed the most beautiful eyes in the world. They were large and wide spaced and, as her mother had said, "They are no color at all." They were never a definite color unless she was very excited or very angry. Then they had a way of changing from a soft, melting brown-green to a deep, sea-green at a moment's notice.

The corners of her mouth were pulled into a tight, grim line now and held there and kept from trembling by sheer force of will. She controlled it as she did the tears. She was twenty today!

She looked at her younger brother, Sean, from under her long lashes. He, too, was somber faced and his mouth pulled tight with pain.

They stood together in the small cemetery in back of St. Anne's church, while the priest

intoned the last prayers over the bodies of Patrick and Mary Murry.

Was it only yesterday, she thought, they were here and alive, laughing with her and teasing her about being twenty and still unwed?

Her papa had laughingly lifted her in his arms and kissed her cheeks soundly.

"Don't worry, love. You're my darlin' and heaven help the man who comes after you. He'd better be prepared for a battle."

She had laughed and hugged him.

"Oh, Papa! I shall always love you best, always," she had affirmed.

She did not hear the gentle voice of the priest. She was listening instead to the inner voices of her mind.

"Smile and stand straight, Erin Elizabeth; you're a Murry and the Murrys are proud."

"Pride doesn't put any bread on the table, Mama," she had answered stiffly, but she still straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin.

"Erin Elizabeth!"

"Well, if Papa would come home and work as hard here as he does at the pub, we might have something for which to be proud."

"Erin, I'll hear no more about your papa. He's a good man."

"Papa, oh Papa. . . ." She really loved him very dearly. His laughing, blue eyes and his ever-ready smile had been a haven when she was a child. But as she grew into a young

woman with needs, she found that a laugh and a pat on the head were not enough. It was then that she opened her eyes to the reality of the world. And it was then she ceased imitating her father's laughing ways and began to imitate her mother's more serious ones.

She felt the eyes of her neighbors and friends on her, for since her parents' death two days ago, she had not shed a tear nor spoken any more than was absolutely necessary. Now, her thoughts were broken into as she realized the priest had finished and was waiting quietly. Slowly, she knelt and picked up a damp handful of earth. Sean followed her example. She dropped it into the dark hole wherein rested the two wooden coffins, together.

As they filed out of the churchyard, many mourners stopped with a soft word and a gentle touch.

"What will we do now, Erin?" asked her brother. Sean was seventeen and a copy of his father. This misery and pain were beyond his understanding. Like his father, he wanted only to laugh at life.

"We'll go home for now, Sean. Tomorrow we'll decide what we have to do."

They had reached the churchyard gate when Erin stopped short. Sean, who had been watching her, followed her gaze move to the gate.

"Good day, Mr. Duggan," said Erin quietly.

"May I offer my condolences, Erin, Sean? I was very sorry to hear about your parents. Both together, it is a real tragedy. I'm sorry."

"It is what they would have wanted, Mr. Duggan. Mama and Papa belong together," she said quietly. Her eyes were blank and she wanted so desperately to run home and lock the door.

"I shall have to come out to the farm this afternoon, Erin. There is some business I must discuss with you and Sean."

Mr. Duggan was the town banker and since Erin knew there was nothing her father had in the bank, she became alarmed.

"Is there something wrong?"

"I shall come out this afternoon. It is something I cannot discuss with you now."

She nodded her head and, with Sean, she moved past him and climbed into her trap.

Charles Duggan watched until the buggy was out of sight. He was quite pleased with himself, for if everything went as he planned, he would have, at the end of the day, two things he had wanted for some time. The Murry farm and Erin Murry.

Erin and Sean rode home in silence. She sat with her hands twisted tightly while Sean slapped the reins against the pony's rump to speed him. When they stopped in the yard in front of the small, thatch-covered cottage, she jumped quickly down. "Be sure to feed the pony before you come in, Sean, and rub him down well. I'll make tea and fix you

something to eat."

He nodded, still silent, and clicked his tongue at the pony. She watched for a moment as they moved toward the barn. Then, with a sigh, she moved to the house. She stood at the front door for several minutes before she could bring herself to open it, still expecting to hear the gentle humming of her mother's quiet voice as she moved about her kitchen.

When she stepped inside, the kitchen was semidark, the only light being what filtered through the large window facing the morning sun. As its pattern of light shone across the room, she remembered her father's laughing blue eyes when her mother had been upset at the expense of putting in the window.

Patrick had laughed his beautiful, contagious laugh and picked her mother up, whirling her about the room until she shrieked and laughed with him.

"You need the light of the mornin' sun, my lovie, to light up your beauty at the beginnin' of each day."

As he smiled and kissed her and lifted each child to see from the window, her mother did as she always did: smiled at this happy, laughing husband and put her worries in the back of her mind to go over when she was alone.

Erin shook herself free of the lethargy and moved to light the lamp. Then, she hung her shawl on a hook behind the door and went to

the fireplace. She stirred the embers with a poker and added more wood. When the fire was burning brightly, she put the kettle on for tea and went to the cupboard. She took out two dishes and put them on the table, then she went to the small outkitchen attached to the main one where several cheeses hung in net containers from the low rafters. She collected a loaf of bread and a cheese and moved back into the room; these she deposited on the table also. She turned as Sean stepped into the room.

"Did you rub the pony well, Sean?"

"Yes."

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes," he repeated.

"There's some stew left from last night and Mrs. McConnell brought over some mutton. Which would you rather have?"

"I'll take the meat and cheese, Erin," he said as he lowered himself to a stool by the table.

"Erin?"

"Yes, Sean."

"What are we really going to do?"

She placed both her hands flat on the table and leaned over closely to Sean. Her face was quiet and her eyes had deepened to the deep color of violets. They held him spellbound as she said softly, "We will stay here and work the farm, you and I together. We can do it, Sean, and we will. Besides, there is no place else for us to go and no one to help us. We will

do it, we must!"

He gulped back his resistance, for Erin had a way of holding him with those deep eyes that left him powerless to resist her ideas. It had always been this way. Sean, unanchored by a serious father's guiding hand, would have been as wild as the sea if it had not been for the power Erin seemed to hold over him. She had found it quite easy to get Sean to do anything she wanted and, realizing her responsibility to her young brother, tried her best with the boy.

She sat down beside him now and put her hand over his. She smiled and her eyes again took on the soft blue as she looked with affectionate pity at him.

"Don't worry, Sean. We'll make out. Why look, we've got this lovely farm and we've got each other. That's more than old Mrs. Murphey has. She lives alone in that old hut by the sea, and she makes out. We will, too. And someday, you'll marry a rich lady and we'll all live in a great palace." She laughed; and he laughed with her, for this had been one of their favorite games of fantasy.

They ate, and as she cleared the dishes, she told him what chores needed doing and they divided them between them. She swung the kettle of leftover stew near the fire to allow it to warm. They would have it for supper.

The rain that had started earlier that morning had stopped and a light filtering of sun was edging its way between the gray

clouds. Erin took a moment to sit on the porch and rest. She closed her eyes and listened carefully as she always did for the soft, faraway sound of the sea.

"Erin?"

Sean had come from the barn and was standing watching her.

"I've finished my chores until after supper. Is it all right if I go over to Duffey's? I told Jamie I'd come by for awhile today."

"Of course, Sean."

"You don't mind, Erin? I'll be back before supper, I promise. Will you be all right?"

"Go along with you, Sean. I'll be just fine. You've done better than I. I've still chores to finish. You go and tell Mrs. Duffey hello for me and thank her for the food she sent." She called the last words to him as he was already moving rapidly down the lane.

Still, she did not move. For some unaccountable reason, she wanted to sit and absorb the beauty and peace that was home. She sat very still for quite some time, listening to the sounds about her. She must have heard the approaching buggy long before she realized it was coming.

Charles Duggan guided the buggy to the front of the house and, stepping down, tied the reins and walked toward Erin, who sat quietly watching him approach.

Charles was an attractive man of thirty-five who had worked very hard to achieve the position he now held. He was tall, almost six

feet, and heavily built. His eyes were brown and his dark brown hair was slightly curly and thick. He was clean-shaven except for a full mustache.

"Good afternoon, Erin. Where is Sean?"

"I'm sorry, Mr. Duggan, I forgot you were coming and told Sean he could go over to Duffey's and see his friend Jamie for awhile. He needs to see his friends now," she said quietly. "He'll be back before supper. Can I make you some tea?"

"Yes, thank you."

She rose from the porch step and led the way into the house. He sat down at the table and watched her move about making the tea.

"She has no idea how lovely she really is," he thought, and the heavy flow of desire for her moved through him as it always did when he saw her. Charles had wanted Erin Murry for almost two years, since the first time her father had introduced them one day on the street. He thought of Patrick Murry, whose foolishness had enabled him to be here today to make a bargain with Erin he hoped she would accept.

Charles was not an evil man, merely a man who took advantage of every opportunity to acquire what he wanted. He wanted Erin Murry.

When she sat down opposite him, she looked at him inquisitively and, taking a deep breath, he began talking.

Chapter 2

She looked at him now through dark, violet eyes, wide with shock and pain.

"You mean we don't have the farm any more?" she spoke quietly through stiffened lips.

"Erin," he began. "Your papa lost the farm a long time ago. I was just letting him stay because of your lovely mother and you and Sean. Now with them gone, I have no choice in the matter. You understand, don't you,

Erin? I have no choice."

She nodded her head but could not speak. There was a lump in her throat she found impossible to even swallow.

"What . . . what will I do?" she whispered. "What can Sean do? We have no place to go."

"Yes, you've a place to go, a place that wants you very much, Erin. A place where your brother can live happily with you and get an education. A place where you can live and be happy if you want that."

"Where, where?"

He rose now and went to her side, taking both her hands in his and bringing her gently to her feet.

"With me, Erin."

"You want us to come and live with you! Oh, I couldn't."

"No, not just come live with me. I want you to marry me."

She gave a startled sound and stepped back from him. "M . . . m . . . marry you!"

"Yes, Erin. I've wanted you for a long time. I could make you very happy, my dear. I would try my best. I love you very much."

She placed her hand against her throat as if she were being strangled, for truthfully it was the sensation she felt. Suddenly, things were beyond her understanding and she felt frightened and alone.

"I know you need time, Erin, and I shall not press you now. Talk it over with Sean. The bank will not take over the house until the

beginning of the month. That gives you six days. In that time, you and Sean can make a decision and you and I can discuss our situation further."

He gently lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed it, then in a few minutes he was gone. She could hear the sound of his buggy receding; then all was quiet.

Erin stood quite still as everything in her world crumbled about her, then for the first time since her parents died, she put her hands over her face and cried. Her slender body shook with wrenching sobs and, slowly, she sagged to the floor, unable to hold herself up any longer.

By the time Sean came back for supper, she had collected herself and her thoughts. She was seated by the fire waiting for him.

"Erin," he smiled as he came in and tossed his cap on the hook behind the door. "Mrs. Duffey thinks it's just grand we're going to keep runnin' the farm; and she says if you need any help, her and the boys would be willin' to give it to you."

"Sit down, Sean. I have something to talk over with you. It's very important."

He sat down opposite her with a questioning look in his eyes. She began to explain as gently as possible the situation they were in. When she came to Charles Duggan's offer, her voice hesitated just for a moment, but long enough for Sean, who was attuned to all her moods, to catch. His face flushed angrily

and all his newfound manly enthusiasm for Erin's protection came to the surface.

"You don't have to marry him, Erin. We'll find some other way. I could work."

"Where, Sean?" she smiled.

"I don't know, but I could find something," he said, desperately.

She leaned forward with a gentle touch and took one of his hands in hers.

"Sean, marriage to Charles Duggan wouldn't really be so bad. He is a very handsome man, almost like my Prince Charming, remember? It would be the answer to all our problems and you could go to school and become a very important man. Oh, Sean, it will all work out. Now, let us have our supper and, in the morning, I will go into town and tell Charles I'll marry him."

They ate their supper without much conversation, then when the evening chores were finished and Sean had gone to bed, Erin sat by the fire with her thoughts.

Marriage was something Erin had planned on for her future, but she had always wanted to pick the man of her choice as her mother had done. She remembered the looks of love that passed between her mother and father. She knew what was required of her in marriage for she had been raised on a farm, but she wondered how it would be for her with a man she did not love. She remembered the laughing pleasure her mother and father had taken in each other, the light touches of

the hands, and the nights they had thought the children asleep when they had made love with so much enjoyment in each other. She felt a tightness in her body and wondered if she would be able to let someone touch her like that.

Thoughts whirled about in her head until she became exhausted and slightly panicked at them. She rose from the chair and went to bed determined to put her dreams aside to face the reality of tomorrow.

She tossed in dream-filled sleep for hours, in which she was rescued from all her problems by a tall man whose face she could not see, but who held her gently and surrounded her with the love she so desperately needed.

She wakened next morning tired and possessed of a strange lethargy that made her want to curl tightly back into the blankets, which she did for a few minutes until she realized what she was doing. "Running away does not help," she thought. "It will not cure my problems, only a miracle could do that."

She rose and dressed, then went to the kitchen to prepare breakfast. After it was started, she wakened Sean. As they ate, Sean watched her closely.

"Erin, if I had a place to stay, you wouldn't have to marry Charles, would you? I mean you could find work and a place to live and. . . ."

"Sean, we cannot live on 'ifs.'" She smiled and put her arm about his shoulder. "Besides, I could not bear to be separated from you. We're all the family we have left and we must stick together."

He nodded, but still his eyes watched her. This sister he loved more dearly than his own life was about to give up her life for him, and he became grimly determined he would find a way out before she married Charles.

They rode into town without talking, each lost in their own thoughts and lost dreams.

Although the town was only twelve miles away, neither Sean nor Erin had been there more than two or three times in their lifetime. It was a bustling town, for the simple reason it had one of the best harbors on the Irish coast.

It was the sight of the tall, masted ships in the harbor that caught and held the fascinated attention of young Sean Murry. For the second time, he stumbled against Erin as he walked, trying to watch the ships; and she spoke out in exasperation.

"Sean, why don't you go down to the harbor and get a good look while I talk to Charles? That way, you can stop stepping on me."

He smiled at her and his eyes lit up, reminding her painfully of their father, for it was the same sparkle of enthusiasm she saw in their depths. "I hope I can guide him in a better path than Papa," she thought, as he gave her a quick kiss and promised to meet

her promptly at three. In a moment, he was gone, and she suddenly had the strangest feeling she should not have let him go.

After standing and watching him until he disappeared, she sighed deeply and adjusted the shawl about her shoulders. Then with a determined step, she headed for the bank to speak to Charles Duggan.

Charles glanced up from his desk at the same moment Erin stepped inside the door. Suddenly, he felt his heart begin to pound as he watched her move gracefully across the floor toward him.

"Good afternoon Mr. . . . uh, Charles," she said with a slight tremor in her voice. "Do you have time to talk to me? If not, I can come back later."

"Oh, no, Erin," he said quickly, motioning her to a seat. "There is always time for you, my dear."

After she had sat still for some minutes, unable to begin saying what she had to say, he spoke softly, gazing directly into her eyes.

"Erin, is this just a friendly visit, or may I hope you've made a decision about us?"

"Yes, I mean no, I mean . . . oh," she stammered painfully, her cheeks becoming tinged with pink.

She looked down at her hands twisting painfully in her lap and tried to still their fluttering.

"I shall be very happy to marry you, Charles, whenever you say." She spoke softly

with her hands on her lap clutched together to stop their trembling.

"Erin," he said her name tenderly. "You shall never regret it. I shall do everything in my power to make you happy. We shall be married within the next two weeks if that is agreeable to you."

She nodded her head, unable to control the sudden burst of panic inside her heart that told her to stand up and run away. The rest of the things he was saying she hardly heard, she merely nodded her head in silent agreement.

"I shall come out to the farm tonight, Erin, and we can discuss our plans and explain them to Sean."

"I've already told Sean," she answered.

"Oh, well, I should like to come out to see you anyway. It might make it easier for you if we got to know each other a little better."

She smiled at him and her eyes were two bright pools of frosted lavender, causing such a stir of warm desire to rise up in him that he hastily began speaking to cover his emotions. He did not even understand himself. He had known many pretty girls, some much prettier than Erin, yet his desire for her was so strong that he wanted to reach out and touch her then.

"I shall see you later tonight then, Erin?"

"Yes, later tonight," she echoed as she rose from her seat and placed her shawl again about her shoulders.

She walked about the town for awhile, looking into the shop windows, but not really seeing anything on display there. Instead, she remembered the feel of Charles Duggan's hand firmly on her arm as he had escorted her to the door. She bit back her tears when she realized that his touch had left her cold and full of fear. Oh, how could she have agreed to marry him? What could she do?

She waited for Sean for some time past their appointed hour when she finally saw him coming rapidly in her direction, accompanied by a tall, extremely good-looking young man.

"Erin!" he shouted and waved when he saw her. He came to her side, pulling his friend along as rapidly as he could. He was bubbly with more excitement than Erin had ever seen even in Sean.

"Erin, I want you to meet someone. This is Mr. Gregg Cannon. He's first mate on the *Amy C.* It just got in port today."

The man was much taller than she had thought when she first saw him. He stood well over her and smiled down into her eyes. His smile was warm and friendly and she found herself smiling back.

"Sean was right: he has a very pretty sister," he said quietly.

"Erin," her brother interrupted. "I've invited Mr. Cannon for supper. Is it all right?"

"We haven't much, Mr. Cannon, but you're

welcome to share what we have."

"If you knew how bad the cook on the *Amy C.* is and how I long for a home-cooked meal, Miss Murry, you would not have to worry," he laughed.

She noticed that when he laughed, his mouth was wide and his teeth were white and even. He was brown from the sun and it contrasted well with the blue of his eyes and the pale blonde of his hair.

"Then you are quite welcome to join us for supper," she smiled. "When do you have to be back on your ship?"

"Well, she sails in a week, but I have to see to her provisions, so I have to be back tonight."

Sean looked a little disappointed, but there was something else about him that caught her attention. She did not know what it was. It continued to hover in her mind on the way home as Sean asked Mr. Cannon millions of questions, all of which were answered quickly and patiently.

Chapter 3

They shared one of the nicest evenings Erin had ever spent. Gregg had a delightful sense of humor and entertained them with stories of places he had been and amusing things he had done. When the time came for him to return to his ship, he rose very reluctantly and stretched his arms above his head.

"Well, much as I may hate to, I've got to get back to my ship. Thank you for the dinner,

Erin. I enjoyed myself very much. It's almost as good as being home."

"Thank you, for your wonderful stories," she smiled. "We enjoyed having you."

"You haven't forgotten, have you, Mr. Cannon?" questioned Sean urgently.

"No, Sean, I haven't forgotten," he laughed and turned to Erin. "I promised the boy he could come aboard ship tomorrow and look her over. I would be greatly pleased if you would come, too, Erin. I would enjoy showing you around."

For a moment, Erin hesitated, thinking of the chores that needed doing, then suddenly she remembered the farm was no longer theirs. This, combined with the worried look in Sean's eyes and the fact that it might be her last chance to do such a thing, suddenly made her feel reckless.

"Yes, I would love to see your ship, Mr. Cannon."

She did not understand the sudden flash of laughter in his eyes or the quick move he made to touch her hand.

"I'm glad," he said softly, his eyes smiling down into hers. "I'm very proud of the *Amy C.* Someday she'll be mine and I love showing her off to someone who could appreciate her."

"And you think I would, Mr. Cannon?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "I think you would, and would you please call me Gregg? We're going to be friends, are we not?"

Erin smiled up at him without any realiza-

tion of the change that came over her face when she did, for Erin smiled with her eyes more than anything else, and they changed from a soft, deep violet to an almost smoky shade of blue. It caught Gregg Cannon so by surprise that he suddenly became very conscious of the beauty of her. She extended her hand to him and he took it merely by reaction, for he suddenly found himself swimming in a sea-blue pool he did not want to leave.

"Then I'll see you both tomorrow?" he asked.

Sean answered quickly with his usual burst of happy enthusiasm at any adventure. Erin nodded her head and gently pulled her hand from Gregg's, who had not even noticed he was still holding it.

As Gregg moved to the door to leave, a heavy step sounded on the porch, accompanied by a knock on the door.

Since Gregg was the closest to the door, he reached out and opened it. For a quick moment, a flushed look of anger crossed Charles' face when he saw Gregg, then he hastily covered the look with a smile at Erin. The look had not gone unnoticed by Sean who looked from Charles to Gregg and dropped his eyes immediately as an idea popped suddenly into his head. He stood very quietly, watching the three in conversation and a soft smile played about the corners of his mouth.

"Erin, good evening," smiled Charles.

"Good evening, Charles. May I introduce Mr. Gregg Cannon. His ship docked at our harbor today. We were happy to have him for supper, thanks to Sean. We've heard so many wonderful stories about so many places." Her eyes sparkled excitedly as she proceeded to tell him of some of the places that excited her so.

As Charles watched her, he felt the deep stir of frustrated jealousy toward the man who could create this enthusiasm in Erin, and he turned to face him with his hand extended in friendship but his eyes were cold and slightly narrowed. Although it went unnoticed by Erin, it was picked up immediately by Gregg, who—in turn—became alert to the existence of Charles' feelings for Erin. He did not understand why it should annoy him to know but it did; and he found himself looking closely at Erin to see if the feelings were the same for her. In the process, his eyes fell on Sean whose emotions showed very plainly on his face. Suddenly, the situation crystallized in Gregg's mind and he felt a sudden flush of antagonism toward Charles, although he took the proffered hand and shook it firmly.

"Would you like some tea, Charles? Come, sit by the fire," said Erin.

"Thank you, I would love some."

As the two moved toward the warmth of the fire, Gregg caught Sean's eye and, with a slight jerk of his head, motioned him to

follow. Sean nodded quickly.

"Good night, Erin. I'll see you tomorrow at the dock."

"Yes," she smiled. "Good night, Gregg, and thank you again for a lovely evening."

Gregg smiled warmly at her, then a slight gleam of malicious laughter entered his eyes when he again noticed Charles's glare.

When Gregg had closed the door behind him, Sean watched Erin for a few seconds in silence. "Erin, I've my chores to finish. I'll be back in a few minutes," he added, looking at Charles. Then he turned and left the cottage, pulling the door firmly shut behind him. For a few disappointed minutes he thought Gregg had really gone, then he saw him standing with his horse in the shadows by the barn. He moved swiftly to join him.

"All right, Bucko," said Gregg as soon as Sean was beside him. "Tell me what's going on and why you're so upset about this gent inside."

He listened quietly without interrupting, but his eyes became narrower and a small muscle twitched in the side of his firm jaw—the only outward signs of his burning inner anger.

He remained silent for so long after Sean stopped speaking that Sean became worried.

"What can I do, Gregg? I just can't let her marry him to take care of me. Erin's so great, Gregg, she'd do whatever she thinks is necessary, but I can't let her do it, I just can't

let her!"

His voice ended with a slightly hysterical crack, so that Gregg patted him gently on the shoulder.

"Take it easy, boy, we have some time. I don't know what I can do. It's kind of hard for me to interfere when I've only just met her. She'll tell me to mind my own business. Give me a couple of days, Sean. Maybe I can come up with an idea or two. In the meantime, why don't you go back in the house? If I were you, I'd try not to leave them alone together too much."

He chuckled at Sean's startled look. "Not that I don't believe Erin could take care of herself. I just don't think she should be put in the position of having to if we can prevent it. Okay, Sean?"

Sean nodded and moved toward the house as Gregg mounted his horse and headed back to town.

He rode slowly, mulling the day's experience over in his mind. He felt sorry for Sean and very attracted to Erin but without an idea in his head of how he could help the situation. He thought back to his own family. His father was a strong man who had built a shipping line with one ship and a determination that was unsurpassable. He had worked from the bottom as cabin boy to the top as captain and demanded the same of his sons.

His mother was a gentle woman, very beautiful in Gregg's eyes, but with a strength

and will of iron in her small frame. Together, his parents had molded their sons into what they wanted them to be. Both he and his older brother, Mitchell, had begun at the bottom as cabin boys and worked their way upward as had their father.

Only two years ago, Mitchell had given up his position as captain of the *Amy C.* and moved into the firm with their father. Now it was Gregg's turn, and he wanted desperately to follow their footsteps for he loved and respected them both very deeply. If he went on as well as he had, he would soon be promoted to captain. Then, after awhile, he would join his father and brother in the firm of "Cannon & Sons, Shipping."

Often in his life, as it did right now, Gregg's uncontrollable sense of humor bubbled to the surface. He chuckled lightly to himself and then, as if unable to contain it, he laughed aloud. "I wonder what they would say if I brought a little, Irish orphan and her brother home with me?"

The thought, after penetrating his mind, would not go away, and he mulled it over all the way back to his ship. He was still laughing to himself when he went to bed. But, expected sleep did not come. Instead, a pair of sea-blue eyes floated in front of him and a soft, full, red mouth that smiled up at him in beautiful innocence.

"Good God," he mumbled to himself. "What the hell am I doing? I've only met the girl

once and here I am thinking of ways to kidnap her from a marriage she probably would be better off in."

He turned over and tried to eliminate Erin from his mind but, still, several hours passed before he finally drifted off into a dream-filled sleep.

Chapter 4

"Come on, Erin!" Sean said in an exasperated voice. "Hurry up, please."

"I'll not go running down the street like a wild woman, Sean. Gregg's ship will not go away yet. He'll still be there when we get there."

Sean didn't know if Erin was angry with him for the night before or not, but for some reason she had refused to be rushed this morning and took what Sean considered a

very long time on herself before she felt ready to go. He smiled to himself when he remembered the night before. Charles had tried in every way possible to get him to leave them alone, but Sean had refused to budge and had caught an odd look on Erin's face as he headed for bed as soon as Charles had gone.

They were near Gregg's ship when they heard his shout and saw him waving from the rail. Sean waved back heartily but Erin stood still for a few minutes, watching the ship with the same odd, still look on her face. Sean grasped her hand and moved rapidly to the gangplank where he almost dragged her up.

"Good morning," called Gregg. "Welcome aboard. Come on, you two. I want you to meet Captain Hardisty."

He escorted them to a man whom Erin thought was probably the biggest man she had ever seen. She stood amazed at his size and just a little frightened of him until she heard a soft, amused chuckle and looked into a pair of the kindest brown eyes she had ever seen. His hair was completely white, as was the huge mustache and beard—of which he was very proud. He had a nose that looked like an eagle trying to escape from its nest.

"Good morning, Miss Murry," he said in a rumbling, deep voice. "Gregg has been talking about you all morning. Welcome aboard."

Gregg flushed a little at the Captain's words, but Erin turned decidedly pink and became furious at her own embarrassment.

"Good morning, Captain Hardisty. It's very kind of you to let my brother and me come aboard. Sean has always been interested in ships and I'm sure he will be very grateful for even a quick look around."

"Let the boy take all the time he wants." The Captain chuckled again. "I'm sure Mr. Cannon can keep you entertained for awhile. I'm sorry I cannot join you. I must be about my business, for we leave in just four days. Nice to have met you, Miss Murry. Now, if you will excuse me?"

She nodded her head, painfully aware of the twinkle in his eyes, her own flushed cheeks, and the presence of Gregg at her elbow.

As the Captain moved away, she was also aware of her inability to think of anything to say. She turned to meet Gregg's eyes in a penetrating gaze at her. Again, she blushed a little but bit her lip.

"Gregg, I'm sorry if Sean and I put you in a position. . . ."

"Erin," Gregg said softly, "nobody puts me in a position. You wouldn't be here if I didn't really want you to be, believe me."

He took her elbow and began to move her forward. As they moved about the ship and he began to talk of her, Erin watched him closely. She saw the great pride he had in

her, and in his own accomplishments, as he described his days from cabin boy to first mate, almost dreamily, as if she were not there and he was only remembering.

"You love her very much, don't you?"

"With exceptions of some time off for schooling, she's been my home off and on for about ten years. Yes, I guess I really do love her." He smiled down into her eyes and, suddenly, she felt a warmth enclose her, as though she were being held and protected. It was the same feeling she had in her dreams. She looked up into his eyes with such a look of lost loneliness that Gregg almost put his arms about her before the realization of where they were struck him. He stepped back a little and looked away from her. Clearing his throat of whatever seemed to suddenly constrict it, he took her elbow again and they continued their tour, although this time a little more aware of each other.

It was well toward lunch time before Erin saw Sean's excited face again.

"Oh, Erin! Isn't she the most beautiful thing in the world? Wouldn't you just love to see her in full sail and ride her to all those great places Gregg told us about?"

"Sean . . . Sean, would you truly love to sail on her?"

"Erin, it would be the greatest. . . ." He stopped short suddenly, realizing what he was saying. "I mean . . . well, sure, I guess I would, but I can always do that some day,

can't I?" he added quietly, but she could see the hungry desire in his face.

She was quiet while they ate lunch together, listening to Sean ask Gregg a million questions about the ship; where she had been and where she was going.

"Well, right now we're going home for awhile. We've been gone almost eighteen months, and I, for one, will be glad to see home for a change. After we've been home," he added proudly, "I'll probably be given command of her for her next voyage."

"Gregg?"

"Yes, Erin?"

"Would you let Sean sail with you as cabin boy?"

"Erin! No!" said Sean vehemently. "I'll never go and leave you, not now."

She turned to him and reached out both her hands to take one of his.

"You will go, Sean, you will, for my sake. To know you are happy is very important to me. You will go, promise me."

She looked at him with her eyes clouded and near to tears.

"Please, Sean, if you love me and would want me happy, go with Gregg," she whispered softly.

Gregg could see the boy was torn between love for his sister and the desire to go. He watched as the boy stiffened.

For the first time in his life that he could remember, Sean resisted his sister's wishes.

"No, Erin, I will never leave you unless I know you are contented, too, and I know you are not. I know you do not love him, Erin. Don't marry him. Come with me."

"What use would I be here?" She laughed harshly. "I'm not a sailor, Sean."

"Well, come anyway. When we reach port, I'll find a place for us to stay and we'll both work and be happy. Erin, please. I can't leave you here with him."

With a choking sound in her throat, she pulled her hands free from Sean and with a sob, ran down the gangplank and blindly toward the buggy they had arrived in. When she got there, she climbed in and sat with her hands over her face while the hot tears hovered behind her closed eyes.

Sean turned a distressed face toward Gregg, who was watching Erin's retreating form.

"Don't worry, Sean," Gregg said quietly. "When we leave this port, Erin will be aboard this ship if I have to shanghai her myself. She's not going to stay here and marry a man she does not love."

He turned to Sean. "You go home, now, and take care of her, but keep your mouth shut. We've got four days. I'll think of something."

Sean nodded and moved wordlessly down the gangplank. When he arrived at the buggy, he got in and, without a word, headed it toward home.

* * *

Three days later, Sean's nerves were close to breaking apart. There had been no word from Gregg. Charles had visited the farm every night, and when he left, Erin had become quieter and quieter until she moved about the house like a ghost. Tomorrow was the day that Gregg's ship sailed, and Sean was determined to find out what he planned to do, if anything.

After his evening chores and without saying a word to Erin, he quietly left the farm and headed toward the docks.

Erin sat in front of the fire and watched the flames flicker lightly over the logs. The sound of footsteps on the porch went unnoticed by her. Even the light knock on the door went unheeded. She did not realize Charles was there until he was standing over her. She looked up suddenly to catch the look of naked desire that crossed his face, then was quickly veiled behind his smile.

"Erin, I knocked. I thought maybe you were asleep."

"No," she said quietly. "I'm sorry, Charles. I didn't hear you."

She rose from the chair and when she did, she was standing very close to him. She smelled clean of soap and her hair shone blue-black in the glow of the fire. Her eyes were large and luminous as they looked up at him. Charles Duggan, at that moment, reached the end of his rope. With a soft sound in the back of his throat, he pulled her into his

arms and his hungry mouth came crashing down on hers. For a moment, she was too stunned to move, and he took her surprise for acquiescence and crushed her tightly to him, his hands moving over her body.

"Erin, Erin," he said softly. "I want you so much."

"Charles," she sobbed. "No! Please."

"Erin, we're to be married anyway. I need you now. Now, Erin."

She was helpless in his hands as he held her effortlessly with one hand and caressed her with the other.

She was crying now, soft, moaning sobs, as she realized that she had not the strength to stop him from doing anything he wanted. His mouth moved from hers to her throat and he gave a hoarse sound as the high neck of her dress impeded him. With one angry tug, he tore open the buttons down the front of her dress and exposed the soft round mound of her breasts with their pink, pointed nipples. With a groan, he grasped and caressed them roughly. Dropping his mouth to them, he enclosed one like a hungry child. She begged him to stop but he was beyond hearing her now as he tore roughly at the remains of her clothes.

In the light of the fire, her body shone creamy white and pink and the sight stirred him to even more violent movement. She was fighting him now but she knew it was useless. Slowly, he was pushing her back

toward the table. As she felt it at her back, she pounded desperately on him with her fists but she could still feel him slowly pressing her backward. The blood began to pound furiously in her head and she could feel herself slipping into darkness. As she began to sag in his arms and the blackness enfolded her, she did not hear the door fly open, nor see an angry Gregg fall upon Charles so violently that Sean had to beg him to stop before he killed him. She did not feel them wrap her in a blanket and carry her out. She also did not see the agony on Gregg's face as he realized that he had almost been too late.

Chapter 5

The gentle rolling motion was the first thing she felt as she opened her eyes to a small room. She was lying on some sort of a bed, nude with a blanket covering her, and as the memory came back to her, she cried out and sat up. Gregg had been sitting on a chair tilted back on its back legs with his feet up on her bunk half-asleep. When she cried out, it startled him so the chair came down with a thud, jarring him quickly awake.

She looked at him with large eyes, that reminded him crazily of a startled deer he had seen once.

"Erin, it's all right. You're safe now. No one will ever try that again. I don't think, in fact, Mr. Duggan will be trying anything with anyone for some time."

He gave a poorly suppressed chuckle as he thought of how Charles Duggan's face had felt against his fist. He fervently hoped he had broken his jaw. He wanted him to remember it for a long time to come.

Large tears formed in her eyes and began to slip down her face. Her body shook with uncontrollable sobs, and for a moment, Gregg could only stare at her. Then the reason for her tears came home to him. He moved to the edge of the bunk and gathered her into his arms, blanket and all. Cradling her against his chest, he let her cry for a few minutes, knowing in some way that this was more than just Charles's attack on her. He stroked her hair gently and made soothing sounds and, slowly, her crying eased into soft, dry sobs.

"It's all right, Erin. You're safe now. No one will ever hurt you again if I can help it. I'm taking you home to my parents. You'll be safe there until you can get your life organized."

She looked up at him with eyes filled with fear.

"What is it, Erin? You're safe here, and

we'll be at my home in a few days. What?"

"Did he . . . did Charles . . . Gregg, oh, Gregg, did he. . . ?"

"No, Erin," he answered softly when he finally realized her thoughts. "Sean and I got there before he could do any more than just frighten you."

She released a long sigh of relief and the tension seemed to flow out of her as she dropped her head against Gregg's chest and relaxed.

He held her gently for some time until he could feel the shock wearing away, and healing sleep overtook her. Then he lay her back against the pillow on the bunk. In the process, the blanket slipped away from her and he gazed down at the beautiful, white body against the dark blankets. In spite of himself, he reacted to her and reached out his hand and gently caressed one breast. She sighed in her exhausted sleep and moved against him. He could feel the firmness under his hand and he held her for a moment. Then he snatched the blanket up from the bed.

"God damn! I'm as bad as he was," he thought and spread the blanket over her quickly before he was tempted to do any more. He chuckled to himself at the physical reaction of his own body. "It's a good thing she doesn't wake up and see me in this condition. For sure, she'll think I'm about to attack her. I need a cold bath to get me back

to normal."

He tucked the blanket around her and dropped a light kiss on her forehead, then he left her to sleep.

When he came up on deck, Sean was waiting for him with a harried expression on his face. Gregg clapped him on the shoulder.

"Don't worry, Sean. She's fine. She's sleeping like a baby. In the morning, she can put everything behind her—you'll see. Women have the craziest way of bouncing back from this kind of a situation."

Sean looked doubtful. He was sure Erin would never be the same again.

"Take my word for it, Sean," laughed Gregg. "By morning, she'll be laughing and happy again. Now you've work to do. I didn't sign you on as cabin boy to loaf. Get to work." He smiled at Sean to soften the words, and the boy smiled back with an expression that again brought laughter to Gregg's eyes. To Sean, Gregg was suddenly the father and big brother he never had and all the hero worship his young mind could muster was directed at Gregg.

"Yes, sir," he said happily and moved away swiftly.

Gregg had given his cabin to Erin and had decided to sleep out on the deck, which he did quite often anyway on clear nights. Tonight, as he unrolled the blanket, his mind skittered unwillingly to Erin, lying on his bunk. So beautiful, so vulnerable.

He lay awake for a long time with his hands behind his head, haphazard thoughts twisting about in his head. Gregg was a very virile, handsome man and had never lacked for willing female company from the time he was fifteen. Yet he found himself stirred beyond reason and desiring this quiet child-woman with everything he possessed. He was also not the type of man to sit quietly and let something he wanted slip through his fingers. So he began to formulate plans in his mind for the winning of Erin Murry. After some time, he gave a soft, contented laugh and, turning on his side, fell asleep immediately.

It was exactly as Gregg said it would be. By morning, much to Sean's delight, Erin was herself and smiling happily at him.

Gregg had explained the circumstances to Captain Hardisty, who was appalled that Gregg had not killed the fellow then and there. Then the Captain had promptly taken Erin under his protective wing, which was exactly what Gregg had in mind, for he did not want one of his laughing, happy seamen to move in on territory he was staking out as his.

Outside of work he had to do, Gregg spent as much time with Erin as he possibly could. They had suppers together with the Captain, who kept Erin and Sean delighted with wild stories of places he had been and things he had seen. The days passed swiftly. Too

swiftly to suit Gregg.

One night, he was standing by the wheel with Captain Hardisty when the realization struck him that within two days they would be home. The quiet face he presented to the Captain did not fool that wise old man for a minute.

"Why don't you go spend some time with her, boy?" he said softly. "You're not needed here this minute. I've run this ship without you for a lot of years. I guess I can stand one more night."

Gregg grinned. "Am I that obvious, sir?"

"To me, boy. To me. I've known you since you were old enough to get up the gangplank without help."

He turned to Gregg with the twinkle of amusement in his mischievous eyes. "If I were a few years younger, boy, you wouldn't stand a chance. I would have wedded and bedded her before now."

Gregg chuckled. "I'll bet you would have. If you'll excuse me, sir, I think I'll go see her before you realize you're not as old as you think you are."

He was moving away swiftly with the Captain's laughter following. He made his way to her cabin and knocked lightly on the door.

In a few minutes, she opened it and his jaw dropped open in surprise. She was wearing a dress. He had brought her on board naked, wrapped only in a blanket, and she had been

wearing a pair of pants and shirt he had gotten from one of the sailors. Now, she stood before him in a beautiful, rose-colored gown with a ruffle-trimmed scoop neckline that enhanced her lovely figure beautifully.

"Where . . . where did you get that, Erin? You are absolutely beautiful."

She had brushed her waist-length black hair until it shone and tied it back with a ribbon. Her cheeks were pink and her eyes shone brightly with excitement at his surprise. She moved about to show off the dress.

"It belonged to Captain Hardisty's wife. She used to sail with him occasionally. Wasn't he wonderful to let me have it, Gregg?"

"The old reprobate," he chuckled to himself. "He sure knows what he's doing."

"What?"

"Never mind, Erin," he laughed. "I came down to ask you to walk on deck with me but now I'm not too sure. After seeing you like this, I don't think I have the strength to defend myself from getting stampeded by my whole crew."

She laughed, delighted in his pleasure of her. "Why don't we just stay here and talk? There is so much I still want to know about you and your family."

He gave a low, mental groan. The combination of her beauty and the close proximity of the bed was almost too much. For a few minutes, he looked at her, and she flushed

slightly but kept her eyes on his. He reached out and took her by the waist and pulled her slowly into his arms. She moved willingly against him and raised her mouth to his as he took it gently and hungrily with his own. He felt his head swim and his body begin to respond to the feel of her in his arms. Reluctantly, he moved her back from him.

"That, lady, is exactly the reason we're not staying here one more minute. I'd better take my chances on deck."

"But, Gregg. . . ."

He could see in her eyes that she really did not know what she was doing to him. He knew he would have to correct the situation before it got out of hand. He instinctively felt she was not the type of girl he had had so often, one that you tumbled into bed with and then promptly forgot. She was more, much more. Making up his mind quickly, he pulled her back violently into his arms, holding her so tight she could hardly breathe.

This time, his mouth was not gentle and his hands moved over her with a pressure and a passion that left her gasping and shaken.

"Now do you see, Erin?" he asked quietly.

For a few minutes, she looked at him with a small smile playing at the corners of her mouth. Then she reached up and took his face between her hands and brought it down to her. Her lips parted under his and her small tongue darted in to meet his. He was losing ground and he knew it. By the time she

released his face, he was spinning in a cloud-filled world.

She dropped her hands and turned to open the door. As she stepped through, she turned with a smile to him.

"I think it's you who are blind, Gregg." Then, with a slight laugh, she moved away from him toward the deck and he realized that she had accepted things on his terms and was waiting for him to claim what she had just told him was his.

Chapter 6

They strolled around the deck in silence for some time. The words he wanted to say were there on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn't understand himself why he hesitated. They were standing silently together at the rail, watching a large, full, yellow moon skim little spots of light off the crests of the waves. There were a million stars piercing the deep, black velvet of the sky.

He turned to face her and, for a long time,

they just looked at one another. He raised one hand to her face and gently touched her cheek, letting his hand move down the line of her jaw to her throat, then slide over her shoulders. He put a gentle pressure on her waist with one hand and she stepped willingly into the circle of his arms.

"Do you know what you want, Erin? Are you very, very sure?"

"Gregg," she began, "let me tell you of my mother and father. Papa was very poor and, even though he cared very much for my mother, he hesitated to marry her for fear of bringing her down in the world. Mama had tried to explain to him that she cared very much for him—him alone—do you understand?"

He nodded slightly.

"You see, Gregg, when there is love, there are only two people in the whole world who count for anything. The lovers themselves. Until they died together, Mama and Papa were more than two people who were married, they were always lovers. I want the same, and since I love you so very much, I want you to love me the same way."

He enfolded her in his arms and held her gently.

"Erin, Captain Hardisty could marry us tonight," he whispered against her hair.

She looked up at him with a devilish light in her eyes. "Would you want to wake that tired, old man up in the middle of the night,

Gregg? He can marry us in the morning."

"But . . . I . . ."

She giggled against the front of his shirt. "Oh, Gregg, why must I behave like a wicked woman when this is so right." Now she looked up into his face and her eyes became serious.

"I love you. I want you tonight with no pressure or strings attached to you. If you still want to marry me tomorrow, I will be happier than any woman in the world. But I don't want it to be the circumstances or sympathy for me that influence your decision. I want it to be because you love me."

She stepped back away from him and said with a quiet smile, "I'm going back to my cabin. I will wait there while you decide."

She had taken only one step away when he was beside her, pulling her roughly into his arms and kissing her so violently that she was almost strangled. Then he moved her toward the companionway and down the ladder to her cabin door. He pushed it open and lifted her in his arms. Carrying her inside, he kicked the door shut so violently that she thought for a minute it was going to shatter. He dropped her to her feet none too lightly and turned her to face him.

"I've been eating myself alive the last two weeks, wanting you so badly I could taste it. Now you tell me you've loved me all this time, that we could have. . . ." He stopped in frustrated anger. "You little vixen, come here."

He pulled her again into his arms and this time, the kiss was gentle, that is, until he felt her lips part beneath his and return all the passion his could give.

He fumbled at the laces of the dress and she reached to help him. It dropped to the floor in a soft, rose pile and she stepped out of it toward him, lifting her arms to him. Again, he gathered her close, letting his hands run over the soft curves of her body, causing her to move tightly against him as though she could not get close enough. Then she stepped back again and began to help him undress. When he had dropped the last of his clothes to the floor, he stood before her and reached his arms out to her again. But she looked at him softly. He was marvelously built, with long, muscular legs and flat, taut, pulled muscle over his stomach. His chest was large and covered with a mat of light, golden hair, almost white from going shirtless in the sun. His manhood was large and swollen and an object of such size as to cause her breath to escape heavily.

"Oh, Gregg . . . you are beautiful!"

He threw back his head and laughed. "A man isn't beautiful, Erin. You are the thing of beauty here, and I can't stand it another minute. Come to me, Erin," he said softly.

She stepped close to him and ran her fingers through the hair on his chest to his shoulders, then raised her arms about his neck. The kiss she offered promised him all

he could ever dream of and, with a small, choking sound, he lifted her from her feet and carried her to the bed.

He laid her down gently as though he was afraid she would break and began a slow, familiarizing with her body. Caressing her breasts, he moved the nipples between his fingers causing them to rise and swell against his hand, then he moved down over her small waist to her belly and thighs, caressing, gently touching, learning. She too felt the desire to discover him and her hands moved over him with a building urgency. When she felt as though she was on fire and her body screamed out for him to take her, he suddenly stopped. His hand was on the soft, inner flesh of her thigh and it moved slowly upward, separating her legs as it gently found the soft, moist warmth he was seeking.

"Erin . . . if I hurt you. . . ."

"Gregg," she sobbed now with wild passion. "Love me . . . love me."

He rose above her and began as slow an entrance as he could manage. It took everything he could muster to stay enough in control. Still the short cry of pain that came from her caused him to hesitate until her hands on his back and the soft words she whispered to him urged him on. Finally, when he had broken through all resistance, he began to move slowly and she struggled to move with him, trying to find his rhythm.

Then suddenly, it was as if they were both moving as one and he felt his senses spiral upward. She cried out his name over and over, among other words of love, and he let himself drown in the beauty of an experience such as he had never had before. They moved together slowly at first, then as the fire gathered, they walked the tightrope of blinding passion until they both lost balance and fell into the flames.

He moved into her deeply now, thrusting with slow, even strokes and she enclosed him with arms and legs of velvet. She rose to meet him, accepting every move and responding to every touch until they both reached a peak of passion that exploded with a blinding fury, leaving them exhaustedly holding one another.

They lay quietly together for some time, neither one sleeping, but both afraid to speak or move for fear of breaking the magic of the moment. He turned her head with his fingers and kissed her so gently and with so much love that the tears started from her eyes.

"Oh, Erin, why did I waste all this time? Why didn't I find you a long, long time ago? I never knew there was anything this beautiful in the world."

"This was our place and time, Gregg. We've found each other now. We can make up for all the times our lives have been empty."

"I do love you, Erin."

"I know," she whispered with a light, soft

laugh. "Haven't you shown me?"

"Oh, Erin, this is only the beginning. I've so much more to show you. We've just taken the ribbon from the gift. Now we open it to enjoy the real beauty inside."

She stirred beside him but his arms held her fast.

"You mean. . . ."

"We've a long night ahead of us, my angel, and I've many years to catch up on and a lot of things to teach you."

"Well," she sighed contentedly as he gently stroked her body with whispering fingers that sent little shivers of delight coursing through her. "I don't want to know where you have gotten all your experience, Gregg, but I do want to share it with you; and never again will I let you share it with another. Not as long as I'm alive."

He chuckled and drew her tight in his embrace and held her so. They lay quietly together for a short time and she was dozing slightly when she became aware of him again by the gentle touch of his hands moving over her. It was impossible to see in the dark room, but she didn't really care, all she wanted to do was feel him close and hear the steady beat of his heart against her body.

They made love again and this time was so very different from the first. It was so heartbreakingly gentle that she wanted to cry out with the beauty of it. This time, it was slower and longer and, several times, he

slowed almost to a stop, leaning on his arms above her until she hung on the edge of fulfillment; she hovered there, not quite going over, until her body demanded this so fiercely that she cried out his name and moved with a flaming passion that finally swallowed him.

He pulled her close to him later with her back to him and held her while they both drifted off into a contented sleep.

Chapter 7

Sean struggled up from a deep sleep, trying to resist the hand that was shaking him so firmly.

"Sean . . . Sean, come on, boy, wake up. Wake up." Gregg stood laughing above him as Sean tried to focus his thoughts.

"If you aren't out of bed in about five minutes, you're going to miss the wedding."

"Wedding?" he repeated dumbly. "Who's getting married?"

Gregg laughed uproariously. "I might be mistaken, but I thought there was only one woman aboard this ship."

"Erin. . . ." he said. "What? . . . Who?" He ran his hands through the black mane of his hair, making it stand on end, trying desperately to pull his thoughts together and focus them on what Gregg was saying.

Gregg was watching him with a delighted smile on his face and the idea suddenly began to come through to him.

"What time is it?" he questioned irrelevantly.

Again, Gregg's laughter rang out. "Almost daylight."

Sean looked up at Gregg and ruffled his hair again.

"I don't understand . . . you said wedding. Erin . . . and. . . ." He gave a wild whoop of delight when the final idea struck him. Amid Gregg's hilarious laughter, he leapt from the bed and jiggled about the room, stopping in front of Gregg with a happy smile on his face. "You and Erin!" he almost shouted. "You and Erin are getting married!"

"Yes, as soon as you get dressed and come along. Captain Hardisty and Erin are waiting for you."

Sean gave another happy yelp and grabbed for his pants, hopping about on one leg trying to get his other leg in. Gregg leaned back on a chair and laughed heartily, as the more Sean tried to hurry, the clumsier he became.

It took him only a few minutes to dress, then he moved rapidly toward the Captain's cabin without any extra urging for speed from Gregg. When they arrived and opened the door to the Captain's cabin, they could hear his low rumble of laughter mixed with the soft, girlish giggles from Erin. The two were sitting at a table opposite each other and it was obvious that he had just told Erin something hilarious, for her face was rosy from laughter and her eyes were shiny. She had put on the same rose-colored dress but had twisted her long hair into a tight knot on the top of her head, pulling it back severely. It made her look large-eyed and innocent. When Sean and Gregg entered the room, she rose immediately and went to Gregg's side. He slipped his arm about her waist and held her close to him, looking deeply into her bright, adoring eyes. Their attention was brought around by the Captain's slight suggestive cough.

"We've only to wait a short time for two more witnesses, then we can get this started. The sooner we get you two married, the better."

"Captain Hardisty has been telling me some lovely tales about you when you were much younger, Gregg," laughed Erin.

"Well, then, it's a good thing we got here in time, or there's no telling what kind of stories he may have been filling your head with."

"All true, my boy," laughed the Captain.

"All true. Should I tell her about the time we had to rescue you from the French police? It seems there was this young countess. . . ."

"Captain Hardisty," Gregg interrupted with a choking sound, "one more word from you and I'll toss you overboard."

"Well, boy, that would leave you in a bad situation with no one to marry you, now wouldn't it?"

This brought some happy laughter from everyone, which was interrupted by a knock on the door.

"Come in," shouted the Captain.

Two of the seamen he had sent for slipped inside the cabin.

"You sent for us, Captain?"

"Yes, I want you as witnesses as I marry these two young people."

Both the men smiled, delighted at the honor, for in her short time on board, they had all come to like Erin and her brother. Their respect and affection for Gregg was unlimited.

The ceremony itself was brief and the Captain read it aloud in short, crisp words. Then, when he was finished, he looked at Gregg. "Now you can kiss the bride and then move aside and give all the rest of us a turn."

Gregg held Erin gently by the shoulders and kissed her slowly and gently. When he released her, she turned smiling toward Captain Hardisty. He looked at her very seriously. "May God be with you, my child,"

he said as he kissed her gently on both cheeks. The gentleness in his voice brought tears to her eyes and she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him, then turned away quickly to keep control of her embarrassment. She was kissed on the cheek by each sailor who wished her well. Then she turned to her brother.

"Just like in our dreams, huh, Erin?" he asked quietly. Brother and sister shared a look of understanding and shared happiness as Erin reached for Gregg's hand.

"Yes, Sean, more even than I ever dreamed. I wish the same for you."

He nodded slightly, his feelings too deep to express in words.

"Break out some rum for the men," said the Captain, and as the two other men turned to leave he said, "Tell Turner to bring his concertina. We'll have a little party for the newlyweds."

They moved hastily to follow his orders, but Gregg seemed not too enthused.

Erin whispered to him, "Don't you want a party, Gregg?"

He smiled wickedly at her and leaned close to her ear. "This is great, but it's not exactly the kind of party I had in mind. I envisioned something a little more private—say just the two of us. I've a bottle of wine in my cabin."

She smiled up at him invitingly and whispered under her breath. The words he barely heard, but they brought a light

chuckle to his lips and a warm glow in his eyes. Before he could answer her again, Captain Hardisty swept her away and Gregg followed laughing.

The party went on for two hours and no matter how Gregg tried, he couldn't seem to hold on to Erin, who was swept away to dance with each one of the men from the Captain on down. She was laughing and her eyes flashed toward Gregg often. Some of the men had wrapped cloths about their waists and were pretending to be women. This brought waves of merriment all around. Finally, Gregg could keep away from her no longer. He whispered something in Turner's ear and the man flashed him a happy smile. Shifting his position a little, he stopped the wild music he was playing and picked up the strains of a light waltz. Gregg moved to Erin's side and smiled down at her.

"My dance finally, Mrs. Cannon?"

She nodded happily and he put his arm about her and they moved together slowly for several minutes. There was not a sound now from the men as the combination of the soft music and watching the couple dance sent them all back on old memories. Gregg danced her slowly but surely in the direction of the companionway without her realizing it, for she was caught up in the warm glow of his eyes.

Suddenly, with a happy laugh, he bent down and lifted her from the floor and, amid

delighted cheers and to Erin's embarrassment, he stepped inside the door and closed it after them.

He moved slowly in the direction of his cabin, without saying a word, and Erin nestled her head on his shoulder and put her arm about his neck. Gently, she reached up her mouth and touched his ear lightly. Then she ran her lips down the side of his neck, which brought a responding quiver of his muscles and a tightening of his hold on her.

"I love you, Gregg," she whispered softly in his ear. "I shall love you till I die."

They had reached his cabin now and he stepped inside and pushed the door shut behind them. Then he dropped her feet lightly to the floor but kept a tight hold on her, pulling her into his arms and seeking her lips with his.

The kiss was slow and searching and she began to feel her body respond with the desire she felt for him. Both her arms were about his neck and his hands moved gently over her. Now, he moved her back from him and, without a word, she removed the dress, slowly and easily as he watched. Afterwards, she stood before him waiting. He watched her, trying to memorize every line of her beautiful body. She flushed a little but stood before him in pride.

"Let down your hair, my love," he said quietly. She reached up and loosened it, letting it fall about her body to her waist in a

rippling, blue-black cascade. He stepped to her side and reached out, entwining his hands in her hair and pulled her toward him.

As Gregg pulled her toward him now and took her willing lips in a hungry kiss, he realized that he felt for her a passion he had never felt for anything or anyone in his life. As his mouth parted hers and his hands moved more insistently, he felt her tremble and he lifted her and carried her to the bed. He removed his clothes quickly and she lifted her arms to him and, with a laugh of utter joy, he joined her.

Chapter 8

Erin stood by the rail and watched the ship coming up to the dock. Sean was moving rapidly about, following Gregg's rapid-fire orders. He stood on the bridge and shouted directions, moving the men in an efficient docking. Erin watched him from where she stood, not wanting to get in his way.

"He is so handsome," she thought, with a slight smile. His light hair lifted and fluttered in the breeze, and a warm glow

engulfed her as she remembered running her fingers through it last night as they made love. His shirt was open and the bronze, muscular chest with its soft curling of light hair caught her attention. His sleeves had been rolled up and a shiny film of perspiration lay on his skin, causing it to glow in the late afternoon sun.

She looked up and caught his eyes on her and he smiled slowly; and she responded by blowing him a light kiss and turning back to the rail to watch the gangplank being lowered. Now, suddenly, she felt her first little tug of fright. She was to meet Gregg's family for the first time and she wondered what they would think of this rapid marriage of their son and if they would like her at all.

She was caught up in her thoughts when she felt his strong arm slip lightly about her. He pulled her close to him and pointed to the dock.

"There, there, Erin, do you see the tall fellow on the dock?"

She could barely make him out as he moved in their direction because the sun was behind him. She could see his hair must have been the color of Gregg's, as the sunlight picked up the golden shine of it.

"That's Mitch, my brother," smiled Gregg. "He's two years older than me."

"Will your parents be here, Gregg?" she questioned.

"No. Mother and father will be waiting at

home. They had no way of knowing I was bringing home my bride or they would definitely have been here."

"How did your brother know we were coming?"

"When we rounded the point by the lighthouse, word was sent home so he came down to fetch me." He grinned. "Won't he get the surprise of his life when he sees you!"

She smiled and turned back to watch and received a definite shock of her own. Gregg and Mitchell looked almost enough alike to be twins. The same golden hair and light eyes. The same height and muscular build and the same tanned skin and flashing smile.

Mitchell had raised his arm to wave when he spotted Erin. For a moment, his arm hesitated, then he raised it again and smiled up at them.

It was only a few more minutes and the tending of a few small details before Gregg gathered her again and headed for the gangplank. Soon they came together and the two brothers threw their arms about each other and Erin smiled to see them pounding each other and laughing together. Then Mitchell turned away from Gregg and looked at Erin with a smile.

"And where were you lucky enough to run across this vision, brother?" he asked quietly.

"Mitch, I want you to meet my wife, Erin. Erin, this big obnoxious oaf is my older brother, Mitchell."

Mitch extended his hand and engulfed her small one in it. His eyes smiled down on her in friendly warmth.

"Welcome to the family, Erin. You are definitely a beautiful addition."

"Thank you," she said, softly, blushing a little as his eyes appraised her.

"Doesn't protocol give a big brother the right to kiss the bride?" he asked.

She nodded, and he bent to kiss both her cheeks. Then he turned back to his brother. "I've got the carriage here and, on the way home, I want a complete story on how this ugly brother of mine got so lucky."

Erin laughed and relaxed a little as she realized how Mitchell was accepting her. "We have to wait a few minutes for Sean," said Gregg. "Erin's brother," he answered his brother's questioning look.

"He should be finished in a few minutes, then we can go home."

While they waited for Sean, Mitch and Gregg fell into an animated, laughing conversation, and Erin quietly watched. As she looked from one to the other, she realized that the brothers had a great love for each other; and she became almost anxious to meet the parents that had raised them.

When Sean finally joined them and was introduced, they all boarded the carriage and started home. After filling his brother in on some of the events of the trip, Mitch and Gregg fell into a "do you remember?" and

"remember the time" type of thing and broke Erin and Sean up in gales of laughter over some of their escapades.

Then, finally, Mitchell relaxed against the back of the carriage and folded his arms. "All right now, brother, out with the whole story. Just how did you meet this lovely creature and why in God's name did she ever agree to marry you?"

Gregg told him the whole story, leaving out Charles's attack on Erin. She smiled at him and was glad he had saved her the embarrassment.

By the time he had finished the story, they were turning into the drive that led up to their home. The house was immense and Erin's mouth fell open with dismayed surprise.

"Oh, Gregg," she said, "you didn't tell me you were rich!"

At this, Mitchell threw back his head and laughed uproariously, and Gregg laughingly pulled her against him.

"You didn't ask me, Erin."

The drive was long and winding and surrounded on both sides by large, well-kept lawns. Along the border of the drive was a long, meticulously even row of poplar trees, reaching up majestically long, pointed fingers to the sky.

The house sat on a small hill and was shaped like a box with one end open. The center was an enclosed garden in which

Gregg's mother took a great deal of pride. Two huge, white columns held up a long, extended roof, and they drove under it and stopped by the front door.

Both the brothers jumped down immediately and each raised a hand to help Erin. Laughing, she diplomatically took both proffered hands and stepped gracefully down from the carriage. Mitchell moved on ahead and opened the front door. Gregg tucked Erin's trembling hand in his arm and winked down at her. His eyes spoke volumes of words to her as he squeezed her hand, and they went through the front door and into the large entrance hall.

Ahead of them was a very beautiful winding staircase. Erin had never seen anything so lovely in her life. Her eyes moved about rapidly, trying to absorb the beauty about her.

"Mother, father!" Mitchell shouted.

A soft voice came floating down from the top of the stairs.

"Mitchell, do control yourself. You needn't shout so," said Jenny Cannon as she started down the stairs. About halfway down, she saw Erin. As Mitchell had done, she hesitated for only a moment, then continued smiling down to greet them. Gregg enfolded his mother in his arms and she held him tightly.

"Welcome back, my son. I'm glad you had a safe voyage."

She turned to Erin with polite curiosity in her eyes. "And who is this, Gregg?" she asked, smiling.

"Mother, this is Erin Murry . . . or was Erin Murry. She's now Erin Cannon . . . my wife."

"Oh, Gregg. Why didn't you write and let us know you were getting married?"

"We were married on board ship, mother. I'll tell you the whole story later."

Jenny Cannon turned to Erin and raised her arms to her with a welcoming smile. "Welcome home, Erin."

Erin's smile flashed and her happiness was plain to see as the tears welled up in her eyes, and she stepped toward Jenny Cannon, who embraced her.

They were standing in a small group when Gregg's father, brought by Mitchell, came to the door of his study. He came toward Erin with a delighted grin on his face and Erin could see immediately where his sons inherited their good looks and charm. He was an older version of his sons.

"What's this I hear about my son bringing home a beautiful bride?" His voice boomed across the entrance hall as he came toward her. He reached out his hand to Gregg, who shook it firmly. "Congratulations, son," he said, looking closely at Erin as he spoke. "You are almost as good as I at picking out beautiful women."

Gregg laughed good-naturedly and Erin

flushed in pleased embarrassment. There was a furor of laughing and talking as Jenny Cannon took them all into the sitting room for tea.

Erin's story was repeated again for Gregg's parents, who both became angry at her mistreatment.

After some time, it was obvious to Erin that Gregg was trying to get her attention. When she looked at him, he winked and jerked his head toward the stairs. The crimson in her cheeks did not pass by Gregg's father, who laughingly rose to his feet.

"Let's let these two get settled. We can all talk again at dinner. Mitchell, take Sean up. He can have the small room next to yours."

Gregg took Erin to his room where he immediately took her in his arms and kissed her hungrily and thoroughly.

"They love you already, my darling," he said, softly.

"Oh, Gregg, your family is so wonderful."

He held her close. "I'm going to make you happy here, Erin. You'll never have to be afraid again," he said softly against her hair.

She stirred contentedly in his arms, but this did not last for long as she felt his hands begin to move slowly over her. She raised her arms about his neck and surrendered to the demanding power of his love.

Chapter 9

Erin sat opposite Jenny Cannon in the large sitting room, watching her as she bent over some sewing on her lap. She had been here six months and Jenny had become almost a mother to her. She had taken Erin under her wing immediately and set about making her life there as happy as possible.

They had shopped together since Erin's wardrobe consisted of one rose-colored dress. She understood why Erin did not want to

dispose of it, so they had hung it lovingly away in the back of the closet. Jenny had taken her about to meet all of their friends and to let her get acquainted with some of the young people in the area. Among these, Erin had struck up a friendship with several who seemed to take to her as much as she to them.

Jenny was now in the process of planning a party in which Erin could be shown off with all the pride and affection they felt for her.

"Have you had the last fitting for your gown for the party, Erin?" she asked.

"Yes, and it's so lovely. I haven't let Gregg see it yet. I want to surprise him at the party."

At this moment, Gregg and Mitchell came into the room together.

"Did I hear someone mention my name? You aren't telling her any more of those childhood stories, are you, mother?" He laughed and bent to kiss Erin lightly on the lips. Mitchell had gone to lean against the fireplace, watching them with a quiet, sober look on his face. He did not even notice that his mother was watching him with a steady, serious and slightly worried gaze.

"Erin, I'm very sorry, my dear, but I've got to go down to the dock this afternoon. There's been more trouble on the *Morning Star*. I won't be able to take you riding as I promised."

"More trouble, Gregg?" asked his mother worriedly. "There seem to be an awful lot of

little incidents lately."

"Oh, it's not serious, mother. Just something I have to look into myself. I'm just sorry to disappoint Erin again."

"Gregg," said Mitchell softly, "I would be happy to take Erin riding if she really wants to go."

Erin had discovered her riding ability and her affinity for horses soon after her arrival, and she enjoyed more than anything else her daily afternoon ride with Gregg.

Erin smiled and Gregg leaned over to take her hand. "There, your problem is solved just like that," he laughed.

Erin and Gregg accepted Mitchell's offer. None of the three were watching the pained expression in Jenny's eyes as she continued to watch her older son. When they turned to her again, it was well hidden by the smile of affection she felt for all three of them.

Gregg left after a few more minutes and Erin excused herself long enough to go up and change into her riding clothes.

While she was gone, Jenny and Mitchell exchanged small talk and, as she looked at him, she realized her son had put up some kind of barrier between them. She was at a loss to figure out why.

Within a few minutes, Erin came running lightly down the steps. Her long, bright hair had been plaited in a braid down her back and she wore a deep green riding outfit that brought out the color of her eyes.

Mitchell's face was turned in her direction as she came down the steps; but his mother's eyes were on him and, as she watched, her heart began to pound heavily. She felt a choking feeling in her throat, for the reason for Mitchell's quietness and withdrawal lately became painfully clear to her.

"Oh, no, my son, no!" she thought to herself, "you will only be very badly hurt"; for it was painfully obvious to her that Mitchell Cannon had fallen desperately in love with his brother's wife.

As the two of them left, happily laughing together, Jenny sat stone-still with her hands clasped in her lap. What could she do, what could she do? She loved her two sons to distraction and had begun to think of Erin as a daughter. She realized something must be done now before this situation was allowed to build into something explosive, something that could destroy her entire family.

Mitchell and Erin rode together for some distance without conversation. She was relaxed and easy with him, and he was careful to do nothing to disrupt their relationship, for at this point, he was content to just be with her. Torn between his love for his brother and his growing affection for Erin, he had spent many sleepless nights of late. At first, he had tried to stay away from her; but his self-control almost fled when she had caught him alone one day. With misted eyes, she asked him pathetically what she had

done to offend him and told him how sincerely she wanted his friendship. When he had smiled at her as easily as he could manage and apologized for neglecting her, she had laughed happily and, putting her hands against his chest, had stood on tiptoe and kissed him quickly. It had taken all his self-control not to pull her into his arms and kiss the soft, warm lips that had too quickly left his. Of the two agonies, he found being with her profoundly better than staying away.

All too soon, the afternoon fled and Erin suggested they head home. Gregg was waiting in the sitting room when they arrived, and Mitchell watched Erin's eyes kindle to a bright flame when she saw him. She rushed to his arms and lifted her lips to him. Mitchell turned away quickly and came face-to-face with his mother. She had such a look of pity in her eyes that he realized instantly she knew how he felt. He dropped his eyes and moved past her, mounting the steps to his room with slow, dragging feet.

Gregg and Erin were in deep conversation when Jenny went back into the room. Gregg seemed to be a little upset.

"What is it, Gregg? What has happened?" she asked.

"Well, I really don't know what is wrong, mother," he said with a worried frown. "I received a letter from the bank this morning. They have some new additions to their Board

of Directors, and there are a few minor problems with some of our notes to iron out. I was just asking Erin if she would take the time to run some figures to the bank for me tomorrow. I won't have time for a couple of days to get there. Old man Turnbull can look things over and by the time I got free, we can work it all out."

"Of course, I'll go for you, Gregg," Erin smiled at him. "But I hope they don't ask me any questions for I know absolutely nothing about business."

Gregg kissed the tip of her nose and squeezed his arm tighter about her waist. "Just be my delivery boy this time, will you, love?"

She nodded. "Now, let me go up and change before dinner. I smell like a horse," she laughed. Gregg let her go reluctantly but called after her as she climbed the stairs, "You smell pretty good to me." She wrinkled her nose and stuck out her tongue but continued to their room.

When Gregg returned to the sitting room, he sagged into a chair and put his feet up on a small bench in front of it. He watched his mother for awhile as her hands moved over her sewing again.

"What's the matter, mother?" he asked quietly.

She looked up, startled. "Matter . . . with me. . . . Nothing, my dear," she answered.

"Mother, we have been too close for too long

for me not to feel when something bothers you. Can't I help with whatever it is?"

Jenny rose from her chair and went to Gregg's side. Reaching down, she took his hand in hers. "This is something I must work out for myself, Gregg. But I promise you if it gets beyond my control, I shall come to you." She bent down and kissed him gently on the head, and he patted the hand she had resting in his.

They were still standing thus when Thomas Cannon came into the room. He smiled at his wife and kissed her lightly as she turned to him.

"Will Erin take the papers to the bank tomorrow, Gregg?"

"Certainly, father. She'll be glad to." He rose from his chair, Erin in his mind, and said, "I think I'll have a bath before dinner. See you both later."

Jenny watched him leave the room and then she went over and closed the door. Walking back slowly, she knelt on the floor in front of Thomas. He smiled down at this woman he had loved so faithfully for so many years.

"Start at the beginning, my love, and tell me what's the matter."

She laughed shortly. "You all know me so well."

"It's because we all love you so," he replied. "Now, what is wrong?"

She took a deep breath and began to

talk quietly.

Gregg opened the door of their room to find Erin in the tub, soaking luxuriously in the warm, soapy water. He walked over and leaned both elbows on the edge of the tub and smiled down at her. His fingers trailed in the water and he moved them slowly up her arm and over her shoulders. They needed no words between them as their eyes held and caressed one another. He rose and slowly removed his clothes. Then he reached down in the water and lifted her up in his arms. As he moved to the bed, she did not give a thought to anything except the warm feel of his arms holding her. She became tinglingly aware of every nerve in her body, and she could feel the warm, pulsing heat begin between her legs and move rapidly through her. She murmured his name once as he laid her on the bed; then, he was beside her, his hands reaching, pushing through her body a feeling like molten lava. Then his lips found her breasts, caught and held them one after the other until she wanted to cry out in ecstatic pain. Her soft, moaning cries of passion were drowned with his lips on hers as he came into her and filled her with the heat of his body. He paused for a moment picking up the rhythm of her moving hips and, when he found it, he moved into her with long, even strokes until she no longer felt anything but him. She clung desperately to him as they

mounted to a dizzy height. Then he took her above and beyond anything she had felt before. Her soft, passionate sobs were caught with his lips and they were moistened by the salty tears of pleasure.

Chapter 10

Erin stepped down from the buggy in front of the bank. She smiled and nodded to friends of the Cannons who spoke to her as she entered the bank. She was asked her name, then escorted quickly to Brian Turnbull's office. He rose from behind his desk as she came in.

Brian Turnbull and Thomas Cannon had been close friends for many years. He was about fifty, tall and heavily built, with a

slightly protruding stomach across which hung the bright gold chain of his pocket watch. He had a shock of truly white hair that floated away from his face as though trying to escape the busy mind beneath. His eyes were a golden, hazel brown and looked at her with warm friendliness.

"Good morning, Mrs. Cannon. Won't you please have a seat?" he said with a smile and waved his hand toward a soft, leather chair. "Thank you, Mr. Turnbull," she said as she sat down and began to remove the papers from her bag. "I've brought the papers you wanted to see. . . . Mr. Turnbull?"

"Yes, Mrs. Cannon?"

"Is there something seriously wrong? Gregg seems to be worried, although he's said nothing about it."

"Well. . . ." He hesitated, and she smiled at him, widening her large, seemingly innocent eyes and completely charming him.

"Please, Mr. Turnbull. I would so like to be of some help to the Cannons. They have been so good to me. But what can I do when I don't even know what's gone wrong?"

He chuckled to himself and his admiration for her jumped a few notches.

"I'm trying to think how I could explain so you can understand," he said, meditatively.

She smiled to herself but still looked at him in wide-eyed innocence.

"You see," he began, "the Cannons have several ships. As is customary in this busi-

ness, they are extended a note on each voyage to cover the cost of expenses. When the ship returns, the note is paid in full and the profits go into their account. In the past five months, the Cannons have lost two ships at sea. They used monies in their account to cover these losses. Two of their ships have been damaged lately and are unable to leave port, which still leaves the *Amy C.* and *The Godolphin*. The *Amy C.* is fully loaded now and almost ready to sail."

"Then what is the problem? Surely the *Amy C.*'s profits will cover any debts they still have out?"

"Ordinarily, yes. But we have a new co-owner of the bank, and he has asked to look over these notes and the feasibility of recalling them."

"Recalling them!" she said with alarm. "But that could bankrupt the Cannons."

He looked closely at her again and the realization suddenly struck him that here was a woman, not the young girl whose head he thought he'd been talking over.

"Mrs. Cannon, your father-in-law and your husband know I will do everything in my power to keep that from happening. I'm sure when I tell him of the Cannons' trustworthiness, he will definitely reconsider his position." He smiled and rose from his chair. "I am very sorry to have to rush you, my dear, but I do have a very important appointment."

"Of course, Mr. Turnbull. I'm sorry to have

taken so much of your time." She rose, pulling on her gloves. He walked beside her to the door. There, he turned and smiled down into her eyes. He placed a fatherly hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, my dear. The Cannons have many friends. They have weathered hard times before."

She smiled up gratefully at him and he opened the door for her. In spite of his kind words, she could not control the sudden, cold chill that flashed through her body and the tight churning in the pit of her stomach. Something dreadful was going to happen, her Irish instinct told her. She wanted to get home as quickly as possible and find Gregg, have him hold her in his strong arms and tell her everything was going to be all right.

She sat silently in the back of the carriage on the ride home, her mind in a turmoil. Gregg had told her nothing of the problems the family was having and she knew that he was trying to protect her. "Like a Dresden doll. . . ." she mumbled.

The driver turned around. "I beg your pardon, Mrs. Cannon, were you speaking to me?"

"No," she smiled up at him, then laughed lightly to herself. "He must think I'm crazy."

After turning things over in her mind, she was determined to talk things over seriously with Gregg. She sat back and relaxed; for once Erin made up her mind about a

problem, she worked out her plan as she had now, then set it in its proper mental place and moved her mind to other things.

She went from the carriage through the front door quickly. Since no one seemed to be about, she went immediately upstairs to change. When she opened the door to her bedroom, she found Gregg already there. As always, just looking at him stirred her emotions and she felt herself grow warm all over.

"Good afternoon, darling. I'm glad to see you home so early. . . ." She paused as she realized he was looking at her very seriously. "What's the matter, Gregg?"

"Erin, love, I've got to take the *Amy C.* out on her next voyage. We've got to leave right away and I'll probably be gone about six months."

"Six months! But, Gregg, what about Captain Hardisty? Isn't the *Amy C.* his ship?"

"Not any more, my dear. I've been made Captain of the *Amy C.* and Hardisty has been given the *Golden Eagle* since her Captain got badly hurt in an accident on the dock."

"Gregg, there seem to have been a lot of accidents lately, haven't there?"

"What do you mean?"

"Gregg, stop treating me as though I'm a child you have to protect and make the world beautiful for. I'm your wife. I've a right to know about the things that worry you or can

affect our family.”

He gave a small laugh and reached his arms out to enclose her. Holding her tightly against him, she could still feel the rumble of the laughter in his chest.

“You were always a fighter, Erin. I guess you always will be. I’m sorry for misunderstanding you, my love. It will never happen again.”

As she sighed and nestled her head under his chin, she never felt the desire to hold him close as deeply as she did now. Her grandmother Murry had always told her she was “fey,” as the Irish put it, able to see ahead. And now, she suddenly felt if she didn’t hold tight to Gregg, she was going to lose him. He was explaining to her what had happened, just as Mr. Turnbull had, but she was only half-listening. The other half was enjoying the deep closeness they were acquiring.

“So you see, Erin, why I’ve got to go. If the *Amy C.* gets back with a reasonable profit, we’ll have enough to hold us over until the *Golden Eagle* is repaired and its Captain in good health.”

Now she tipped back her head to look up into his worried eyes. “Of course I understand, Gregg. It’s just that I will miss you so terribly. Six months is so long.”

“I know, Erin, and I will miss you but it’s something that must be done.”

“You don’t think they will recall all the notes while you are away, do you?”

"Mr. Turnbull has assured me he will not let that happen and, once I'm back, everything will be all right again. Now, let's stop talking while you show me just how much you are going to miss me." He smiled down tenderly into her eyes.

"I shall have to help you pack your clothes."

"They're already packed," he answered quickly. "I've nothing to do but say a loving farewell to my wife and I have 'til evening tide to do that."

She relaxed in his arms as he molded her body to his and kissed her gently and lingeringly.

"Gregg?"

"Yes, my love?" he murmured against her throat as his hands continued to move gently over her.

"I would so love to have a child, Gregg," she said softly.

He held her a little away from him and looked at her. Then he smiled wickedly. "I'll do my very best to accommodate you, my dear." Then he pulled her back into his arms and sought her lips again. This time, his mouth was demanding and full of passion and she responded with the same bright flame of desire he always rose in her.

She stepped away from him and began to remove her clothes. He watched her for a moment, then began to remove his own. Soon, they stood together, her breasts pressed against the broad expanse of his chest as he

moved his hands down her back and over the soft, round curves of her hips.

"Oh, Erin, I do love you so much," he said as he lifted her in his arms.

Their lovemaking was slow and tender as though they had found each other again for the very first time and, for a long time afterwards, he held her tightly against him.

The sun was setting and soft shadows had begun to tiptoe into the room when he stirred.

"Erin . . . Erin, it's time for me to go."

"I know," she whispered, but still she clung to him for one more moment.

Then he firmly moved away from her and rose from the bed. He did not look back at her again but went about dressing and picking up some things he would take with him. He knew she was crying softly, the last tears she would allow herself before he left.

At the dock, she stood beside Mitchell and waved as Gregg's ship pulled away. She stood for a long time and watched as the ship moved out of the harbor toward the open sea.

Finally, Mitchell took her elbow. "We have to go home, Erin," he said quietly.

She began to cry again and, not realizing the havoc she was causing, lay her head against Mitchell's shoulder. He pulled her into his arms and held her as she cried out the bitter tears.

Chapter 11

The sea was still, glistening like a piece of blue-green glass. They had sat calm for two heat-filled days, much to Gregg's distress. Sean asked him, for the hundredth time in the past forty-eight hours, "Do you think it will stay this way much longer?"

"Hard to say, Sean. I don't like this. We've been becalmed before but there's something different this time and I can't put my finger on it. It's as if something was building up

somewhere. I hate to think what it might be."

Gregg kept his men as busy as he could, but he was running out of activities. Sean watched him through narrowed eyes. Gregg was really worried, he thought.

They were standing together leaning on the rail watching the cloudless sun-filled sky when a disturbance on the deck interrupted their thoughts. Gregg swore under his breath and, pushing himself away from the rail, moved rapidly in the direction of the shouting.

Two sailors circled each other warily with drawn knives. They were surrounded by a tight knot of men who encouraged them with loud calls and shouts.

"What's going on here?" shouted Gregg as he pushed himself through the group to the center. "Put those knives away, Jeffers, Cotton, right now!"

The two men reluctantly did as they were ordered, but continued to glare at one another. Gregg realized that something had to be done and decided he had the answer.

"You two want to fight it out, I'm going to let you."

They both turned to look at him with surprised eyes.

"I don't know what your fight is about and I don't care. I'm not cleaning any dead bodies off my ship. I need every man I've got. Cotton, Jeffers, strip to the waist," he ordered briskly. They did as he ordered, then watched

him expectantly.

"Now, you men move back." They moved away from the two until they formed a very large circle. "Now, you use your fists and the time you have is ten minutes. Whoever knocks the other down three times is the winner. Agreed?"

The two men looked at each other, sizing up his opponent. Gregg had judged well, for the two were almost the same height and weight. They both nodded their agreement and Gregg stepped back away from them, taking his watch from his pocket. "Now!" he said, sharply.

Both men crouched and circled each other warily. Cotton was a tall, heavily muscled man who had sailed on the *Amy C.* for five years. Where he had come from, Gregg had no idea, but he suspicioned Captain Hardisty had rescued him from some type of serious trouble, for he had an extraordinary loyalty to the Captain, which he had transferred immediately to Gregg and the *Amy C.* He had blonde, almost white hair and a pair of deep, blue eyes that could glow with friendly humor or, as now, shine like two pieces of blue glass. His lips were pulled into a grim line as he faced his opponent.

Jeffers was his opposite in many ways but not in strength. As light as Cotton was, Jeffers was just as dark. He was slender hipped and heavy chested. He moved with the grace of a cat with all his weight on the

balls of his feet.

The two men came together with a violent crash, and Sean watched in awe as they smashed at each other with fists the size of hams. The fight went on for several minutes, each man standing well against the other, and Sean began to think it was impossible for two men to give each other such punishment without one of them collapsing. Then suddenly, he began to notice that Jeffers was beginning to weaken. With a sudden, mighty blow, Cotton caught him on the side of his head with a heavy, balled fist. Jeffers dropped like a stone to the deck and lay still while Cotton swayed above him, on the verge of a collapse himself.

"Somebody throw some water on him and drag him to his bunk," ordered Gregg. Then he turned to Cotton, and Sean overheard their conversation without their realizing it.

"Cotton, you all right?" questioned Gregg.

"Yes, sir."

Gregg lowered his voice so that he thought only Cotton could hear. "I don't suppose you want to tell me what this is all about, do you?"

"No, sir," mumbled Cotton, sweating profusely. He cast his eyes in any other direction except directly at Gregg.

"Cotton . . . this had something to do with me, didn't it?" he asked softly.

"Beggin' the Captain's pardon, sir, but it was a personal matter," said Cotton stubbornly, thrusting out his chin and raising his

eyes to a point somewhere over Gregg's head.

"Can I go now, sir?"

Gregg gave a resigned sigh. "Yes, you can go, but, Cotton?"

"Yes, sir?"

"If you feel there's something you want me to know, you can find me in my cabin anytime tonight."

For the first time, Cotton looked directly at Gregg and, as their eyes met, Gregg could see that he was struggling with a decision. Then he gave a slight smile and again his eyes turned a softer blue. "Yes, sir."

He turned away and Gregg watched him as he made his way below decks.

For the rest of the day, Gregg kept his men as busy as he possibly could. Even Sean, who had spent the last two days loafing, was sent running in all directions on a multitude of errands.

The sails hung limp and the ship swayed gently in the calm waters as the sun lowered toward the horizon. Sean found Gregg leaning on the rail, watching the last rays of sunlight across the water. He had a very worried frown on his face as he scanned the horizon.

"What the matter, Gregg?" he asked as he leaned his body against the rail beside him.

"I wish I knew, Sean. There's something wrong. I've got the strangest feeling the world is about to explode and I just don't know what to prepare for."

"You think the men are going to cause trouble?"

"No, I think this fight took some of the steam off. It's not that, it's something bigger." Suddenly, he gave a dry laugh and shrugged his shoulders. Turning from the rail, he looked at Sean.

Sean was eighteen, now, and a male version of his sister. He had the dark, black, wavy hair over his now deeply tanned face, from which shone two deep, blue, ever-curious eyes. He was almost as tall as Gregg and, with the work he had been doing, had begun to fill out well.

"You have early morning watch, don't you, Sean?"

"Yes."

"Why don't you get some sleep? There are some islands not far from here and, if we can pick up some decent breeze, we might get there tomorrow. Then you can come ashore with me."

"Thanks, Gregg," he said with a smile and turned away to follow his orders.

For a long time, Gregg leaned on the rail and watched the sea and the sky. He had never seen or felt the atmosphere like this. Some vague fear prickled the short hairs on his neck, and he felt a hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach. He had to admit to himself that he was scared to death of something he could not put his finger on.

Finally, he sighed and moved away from

the rail. He gave a few, crisp orders to the men and left his first mate in charge. Then he went below to his cabin for some sleep. For a long while, he lay on his bunk with his hands behind his head and allowed himself the luxury of remembering Erin. This was something he saved when he had his few, short hours alone. Now, he realized between thoughts of her and his feeling of unrest, he was not going to be able to sleep.

He rose, dressed and went up on deck. It was extremely dark and he looked up to see that the stars were covered by a mist of fine, dark clouds. He went to the wheel to relieve Mr. Phillips, his first mate.

"Go below and wake Sean. His watch is next. Then get yourself some sleep."

"Yes, sir," he said quietly and left.

It was about ten minutes before Sean came up on deck, rubbing the sleep from his eyes and stretching, stifling a yawn.

A closeness had developed between Sean and Gregg in the months they had been together. Sean respected his brother-in-law, as all the men did, for his abilities; for Gregg never asked a man to do anything he could not or had not done himself. Gregg had allowed him to develop into his own man among the crew, working his own way up in their esteem.

A light breeze had picked up and now the ship was moving lightly forward.

"Do you feel better now, Gregg?"

Gregg chuckled nervously. "I'm getting like an old woman, Sean. I guess it's time for me to retire to my pipe and slippers."

"Yeah! A pipe and slippers and Erin on your lap."

They laughed together. A few minutes later, Cotton came up the short steps to the bridge. Sean and Gregg were standing together when he approached them.

"Sir?"

"Yes, Cotton, what's the matter?"

"You're goin' to think I'm crazy, sir, but there's somethin' terrible gonna happen." He went on quickly when Gregg tried to interrupt. "I seen this before, sir, honest to God. There was a volcano erupted on an island one time and I saw it rip up the ocean somethin' terrible, sir. I seen it, I swear." He was sweating slightly.

"I believe you, Cotton," Gregg said softly. "But just what can we do?"

"We gotta run ahead of this wind, sir, and stay ahead. I don't know exactly what's coming but believe me, sir, it's gonna be bad."

"All right, Mr. Cotton. We'll take your advice. I don't want anything to happen to the *Amy C.* Give the orders to pile on all sail. We'll keep ahead of this wind as much as we can."

Cotton looked relieved and was about to speak again when his eyes began to bulge and his mouth dropped open. Both Gregg

and Sean turned to look at what he had seen over their shoulders. Gregg's face went white, and he groaned. "Oh! Jesus Christ."

Sean could only stare bug-eyed at a wall of water about fifty feet high bearing down on them at an amazing rate of speed.

"Tidal wave!" shouted Gregg and Cotton together. They both knew that there was no way of escaping it.

Sean had moved close to Gregg and the men who had awakened at the shout were also watching the approaching destruction.

Gregg's mind turned to Erin and he called out her name once as the wave struck the small ship with tremendous violence, lifted it as though it were a toothpick, and broke it to pieces.

Chapter 12

Hands pulled at him, but he could not seem to focus his eyes. He became violently sick and could feel his stomach twisting with pain as it discarded some of the salt water he had swallowed. Still, he could not seem to bring himself out of the fog to focus his eyes on whoever had hold of him. Half of him was lying on something solid while his legs dangled in the water. He could hear someone's insistent voice but could not make

out what it was saying. Then everything darkened again and he felt as though he were falling into a black void.

The next time he returned to consciousness, he could feel hot sun beating on his face. He groaned and tried to speak but his mouth was so swollen nothing came out but a low, guttural sound.

"Lie still and rest, Gregg," said a voice from far away.

He felt something cool touch his forehead and he slipped again down the same black well he had just crawled up out of.

He didn't know how long he continued to fall in and out of consciousness, but once he opened his eyes and there were bright stars glittering. The next time, he felt again the heat of the sun on his face. Finally, the world came back into view and he opened his eyes to the bright blue sky. He felt so tired, as though just blinking his eyes was going to be the hardest thing he could accomplish. He turned his head to the side to try to find out where he was and who was with him. Sean and Cotton were sitting cross-legged on the hatchway they were using as a raft. They were talking to each other and, unaware, Gregg had returned to consciousness. They both turned at the sound of his voice.

"Well, Cap'n, you've finally decided to join us," said Cotton.

"Oh, God, I feel terrible. I don't remember anything after the wave hit. Cotton, are there

any others?" he asked in a leaden voice.

"I don't know, sir. I only know about us. The *Amy C.*'s a million pieces scattered over the ocean." He hesitated as he saw Gregg wince at his words. "Sean's the first one I found and he was almost dead, hanging onto a toothpick. Then about five minutes later, we saw you, and it's a good thing Sean jumped in after you 'cause you was gone."

Gregg turned to look into Sean's face, and they exchanged unspoken words of gratitude. Gregg tried to move but could not get his body to obey.

"What's wrong with me?" he asked quickly.

"You've been sick for three days. You're just too weak to do anything. Lie still. There's some islands near here and, if I've got my bearings right, we're going to hit one of them soon."

"Soon enough, Cotton?" asked Gregg, softly. "We have no water and it's been days. If we don't have water soon, reaching an island won't make any difference."

Cotton chuckled and moved over closer, touching Gregg's arm. "Well, now, Cap'n. I guess you got something else to thank the young 'un for." He pointed behind the raft. Gregg lifted his head to see. Being towed along by Sean's shirt was a barrel. Gregg began to laugh. "That's full of water, I presume."

Cotton smiled in response. "Yep. The kid found it floatin' and jumped after it almost as

soon as he heaved you on board."

"Well, Sean, I guess we both owe you our lives," he said, with a smile. "I for one, am very grateful."

"Well, I'd add a second to that," said Cotton.

Sean seemed to swell slightly and his eyes shone a soft blue. "Don't you think we ought to paddle or something?" he asked the two men quickly to change the subject.

They both laughed aloud at the combination of his embarrassment and the suggestion that they could effectively paddle anywhere.

"We're locked in a current right now, boy," said Cotton gently. "We couldn't do no good paddling with or against it. If I'm right where I figured we was before we went down, we should be near one of the islands."

They floated with the current for two more days. They were suffering now from hunger and exposure to the elements. The salt spray was leaving a deposit on their skins. Cotton made them take off a piece of clothing and tie it about their heads for some protection from the sun.

It was in the very early hours of the morning when Sean stirred himself awake. He looked up to see Gregg outlined against the night sky.

"Gregg?"

"Yeah."

"What's the matter?"

For awhile, Gregg didn't answer. Then, he said very softly, "The barrel of water is gone, Sean. We lost it sometime during the night."

Sean groaned and sat up to look at the empty place behind the raft. He and Gregg looked at each other and both realized, without the water, they could not last much longer.

"Shall I tell Cotton?" asked Sean.

"No sense waking him up with news like that. He'll find out soon enough."

They sat together silently, each one caught up in his own thoughts. Finally, Sean dozed off again but Gregg sat quietly for a long time, his mind drifting back to Erin and the pain she would feel when they told her the *Amy C.* was gone and them with it. His thoughts drifted back to some of their pleasant times together and he was lost in memories.

When the morning sun came up, Cotton stirred awake. He sat up and stretched; then his eyes fell on the wake of the raft where the barrel of water had been. He turned to Gregg and they looked at each other silently.

"God Almighty," whispered Cotton.

"Sean already knows, Cotton. He's handling it very well. He's a strong boy."

Cotton nodded. There were no more words to say. They both knew that without the water, they could not hope to survive much longer.

The hours trailed along slowly. All three of

the men were silent. There was nothing more to be said. By the end of the day, they were already feeling the pangs of thirst, as the relentless sun had absorbed much of the water from their systems. None of them really slept much that night and all three dreaded the first rays of the morning sun.

Another day, then another. Gregg did not know where he began to lose his hold on reality. He felt very tired and closed his eyes to sleep.

They did not hear the crashing of the waves against the small island and could have done nothing about it if they had. They did not even feel the hands of the men who finally lifted them from the raft and carried them to the shade of the palm trees.

At one time, Gregg's eyes cracked open but he thought he was hallucinating, for standing over him was a tall, smiling man with the largest mane of thick, fire-colored hair he had ever seen. He gave a choking gurgle of laughter to himself as he thought, "I've died, and the devil has red hair."

It was another two days before any of the three opened their eyes without the shine of fever and with any knowledge of their surroundings. When Gregg opened his eyes, he saw that the three of them were in a small, thatch-covered hut. There was no one else there except Cotton and Sean, who both seemed to be asleep. He tried to move but was so weak, he could barely lift his arms. He

stirred and tried to sit up, but was unable to manage that.

What he did manage was to draw the attention of someone outside the hut. A small, brown face with shining eyes peeked in the door and then disappeared in a minute.

"Hey, come back!" Gregg tried to shout, but all that came out was a hoarse gurgle, which was enough to wake the other two occupants of the hut.

"Where are we?" croaked Sean, hoarsely.

"Damned if I know, Sean. On an island somewhere."

They lay very still, not from choice or lack of curiosity, but simply the lack of ability to move.

They did not have to remain so for long because the door covering was drawn aside and the most beautiful girl they had ever seen crossed the threshold into the room and smiled brightly down at them.

She was young, not over seventeen, Gregg estimated. She had the soft, golden-brown skin of the true islander, but there any resemblance stopped. Her eyes were green crystals and her hair was a copper-brown and hung long and thick to her waist. About her graceful body was wrapped a flowered piece of cloth that did absolutely nothing to hide the curves of her rather voluptuous, long-legged body.

Cotton did his best to sit up, his eyes nearly popping from his head, and even Sean

stirred with a magnificent effort to get to his feet. Gregg, himself, was paralyzed.

She stood surveying them closely and seemed satisfied at their progress. She placed both hands on her hips and smiled broadly. If the men were flabbergasted at her appearance, they were even more amazed when she spoke to them.

"You bastards gettin' well pretty damn quick. You bunch of strong fellows. You make girls on the island pretty damn happy quick, I think."

She was amazed at their reaction: Gregg doubled over with laughter and Cotton collapsed on his mat in mild hysterics. Sean simply stared at her with his mouth open.

They were in for more surprises as the cover was again pulled aside and the huge, towering figure of a man with a shock of flaming hair and bright, green eyes entered.

"Ah, good day to you, laddies. Angus McAllum at your service, sirs," he boomed in a voice as large as his body.

"Well, I see I didn't die after all," laughed Gregg. "I thought I had and you were either the devil or my guardian angel."

McAllum laughed heartily. "I've been called many things in my day but never an angel."

"Where are we, sir, and how did we get here? Did you find any more of my crew? Did? . . ."

"Laddie, all your questions will be an-

swered in due time. For the time being, you rest and get your strength back. It's enough to know you're on McAllum's Island and safe. The rest you'll find out when you're on your feet."

He turned to the girl. "Take good care of them, Tia," he said firmly, then he turned away and abruptly left them as Tia looked toward the three men with a laughing glitter in her green eyes.

Chapter 13

They mended rapidly under excellent care from Tia and several other young girls that helped her. At each visit, Gregg and Cotton enjoyed more and more the outgoing daughter of Angus McAllum. When she was asked questions about her father, she would look at them with mischief in her eyes and say bluntly, "Mind you own goddamn business. You want to know papa's business, you ask Papa."

At this type of language coming from a pretty, young girl close to his age, Sean would flush with embarrassment and soon ceased to ask her anything at all for fear of the answers he would get.

When he and Gregg were able to walk about, they were given complete freedom of the small village. It consisted of about twenty-five of the same thatch-covered cottages in which they had found themselves when they awoke. These huts were in a circle about one very large hut which proved to be Angus McAllum's home and the place where he held court, for Angus was literally king of his own small world.

He and Gregg were engaged in conversation one bright day, seated outside Angus's hut with a cool drink, watching the children at play in the surf not far from them. Gregg had told him almost everything about himself in the past month, but realized that he knew nothing of Angus at all.

"Angus, what about you? How did a true-blue Scotsman like you ever get to be king of his own island?"

For a long time, Angus didn't say anything, and Gregg began to feel maybe he had offended him somehow. He was about to apologize for his curiosity when Angus began to talk in a quiet voice, which was extremely unusual for him.

"Well, laddie, it's a very long story, and, I imagine, a story you've heard before. I was

rich, married and a father, happily and blindly. My wife, it seems wasn't quite as happy. There was a string of men before I caught her one time with one of her lovers." He paused, and Gregg did not say anything in reply.

"I killed them both and ran," he said quietly. "For several years, I ran, then one day my ship went down and I thought it was all over. When I woke up, I was on the beach looking up at Tia's mother. That was eighteen years ago. I've been a happier man here with these people than I ever was with all my money before. Tia's mother was very beautiful and I grieved deeply for her when she died. Now I try to keep these people happy and organized as best I can without letting in too much of the outside world to spoil them."

"I see," said Gregg softly. Angus turned to look at him and Gregg felt he had never been more closely examined in his life.

"Aye, laddie. I think you really do."

"Speaking of the outside world, Angus, how can Sean, Cotton and I get back to our homes?"

"There's a ship stops by here once a year. The Captain's a friend of mine and would never tell anyone where I am. You can leave with him when he comes if I have your word that you'll do the same."

"And if I don't give my word?"

Angus turned to look at him and the green eyes were hard.

"You'll never leave the island." He stated this with such assurance that Gregg knew he meant what he said.

"How do you know I'll keep my word once I'm gone?"

Angus chuckled and his eyes glittered again with amusement.

"I know an honorable man when I see one, laddie. I've known too many of the other kind. I'll accept your word."

"You have it, Angus, along with a great deal of gratitude for saving our lives."

Angus shrugged away the thanks with a soft laugh and they continued to watch the sea in silence, while each was lost for awhile in his own thoughts.

"Just when is this ship due, Angus?"

"No way to give an exact time, Gregg, but I'd say in about another six months."

"Six months!"

"Sorry, laddie. That's the best can be done. You might just as well make yourself as comfortable here as possible and enjoy yourself. There's no other way off the island."

"Oh, God, Angus. Another six months. It's not that I don't want to stay, but. . . ." He proceeded to tell Angus about Erin and the problems at home, while Angus listened and nodded his head in sympathy.

"I don't know what's going to happen with the company or my family since the *Amy C.*'s gone down. And Erin . . . Erin will have no way of knowing I'm alive."

Angus turned to Gregg. For a few minutes, he didn't speak. Then he said in a quiet voice, "Laddie, families that love each other have a way of bouncing back from bad luck. I think from watching you and listening to you, that your parents, your brother and you must be very close. I don't think losing money is going to alter that, do you?"

Gregg thought back to his parents and realized that what Angus said was true.

"And if your wife really loves you, do you think she's going to give you up that easily? She'll hope and wait a long time."

Gregg accepted this and looked at Angus with a smile tugging the corners of his mouth. "You're a very wise man, Angus."

This brought a roar of laughter from Angus.

"No, laddie. Just old, boy—just old."

He was still laughing to himself when they saw Sean and Cotton approaching them, deep in conversation. As the two were moving in their direction, Tia stepped out from between two of the huts directly in their path as though it was accidental. Gregg and Angus exchanged a look of amusement as they watched this deception.

Cotton and Sean stopped to talk for a minute with the girl, although it was Cotton who seemed to do all the talking as Sean always seemed to be tongue-tied in her presence.

After they had conversed for a few min-

utes, Sean and Cotton again headed in their direction, not being able to see the look on Tia's face as Gregg and Angus could from their position. She watched the two men as they moved away from her, then her eyes rose over their heads and she saw Angus and Gregg watching her. Unperturbed, she flashed them a bright smile and waved as she turned away. This brought a murmured chuckle of approval from Angus, and Gregg looked quickly in his direction.

"Your daughter is very lovely, Angus. Aren't you just a bit worried about her effect on Sean and Cotton?"

At this, Angus really laughed. He threw himself back against the palm tree and laughed until the tears rolled down his face. Gregg simply watched in stupefied amazement.

"Ah, laddie." Angus choked and wiped the tears from his face. "If you want to worry about someone, worry about Sean and Cotton's effect on her, for if there ever was a lassie that could handle herself, it's Tia. She'll do her own picking and choosing, and God help the man she wants for the laddie won't stand a chance."

He was still laughing when the two men reached them, and Sean and Cotton looked at them rather doubtfully. "It's nothing, lads."

He laughed again as he rose and walked inside his hut. They could still hear it as they looked at Gregg for some kind of explana-

tion. Gregg simply shrugged his shoulders with a grin.

"What have you found out about leavin' the island, Gregg?" asked Cotton.

Gregg told him what Angus had said about the ship coming.

"Well," replied Cotton. "I know how things are with you, Gregg, and I'm sorry. But for myself, I'd just as soon stay here if Angus allows it. I've never seen a place closer to heaven in my life. You think the old man would mind if I made this my home, too?"

"I don't think so, Cotton. I'm sure he would welcome you as long as you live by the rules he's set for his people."

He turned to Sean. "What about you, Sean?"

"Well," he began slowly, "we don't have to make a decision for a long time, do we, Gregg? I guess I'll just wait and see what happens in the next six months before I make up my mind."

They talked together for awhile longer, then Cotton moved on about some business and Sean started toward the warm surf for a swim. Gregg watched him go. He had become as close as a brother to Sean, and he became amused at the thought of what was happening to the boy without his knowledge. Gregg smiled to himself. If Tia didn't explain things in a better way before he got the chance, he was going to have a talk with him.

Chapter 14

The days drifted by, beautiful blue-skied, sunlit days in which they swam, fished and ate to their heart's content and listened to some of Angus's tall sea stories.

It was the nights that were bad for Gregg. Cotton had long since gotten permission from Angus to stay on the island and had chosen himself a beautiful, young bride from among Tia's friends. Gregg had the suspicion that he had asked Tia first and, for some

reason, she had refused him.

He stood at the doorway of his hut looking out at the night sky. Sleep was an impossibility. The night was warm and a soft, cool breeze was blowing in from the ocean, swaying the palms silhouetted against the sky.

He had just awakened for the tenth time from frustrating dreams of Erin and could not, at the moment, face going back to bed and having the same dreams repeated. He slipped into his pants but left off his shirt as the night was so warm. Leaving the hut, he walked slowly to the beach. The surf brushed gently against the sand, washing away his footprints almost as soon as he stepped out of them.

He groaned inwardly as he thought of spending more months facing the same, restless nights. It was still three months before the time Angus had estimated for the ship's arrival, and Angus had warned him that the time could not be strictly depended upon, for the ship had sometimes been two to three months past the expected date.

He was so engrossed in his thoughts that he did not see Tia standing at the edge of the trees ahead of him, waiting, until he was almost upon her.

"Tia!" he said, in surprise. "What are you doing out at this hour?"

"May I talk with you for just a little?" she asked, in what was for Tia a very sub-

dued voice.

He was very surprised and curious at her attitude, then it suddenly dawned on him and raised an alarmed feeling.

"Are you all right, Tia? Has someone? . . ."

"Please," she said softly. "Could we sit and talk?"

He moved to her side and they sat together under a tree. For a long time, she did not speak, and Gregg was really becoming afraid that maybe something had happened between her and Sean or Cotton. He was just going to ask her out of impatience when he looked at her and saw the glistening of tears against her cheeks. He changed his attitude immediately.

"What is wrong, Tia?" he asked gently.

She stood up and he looked up at her silhouetted against the night sky.

"Gregg, am I pretty like English girl?" she asked.

"You are a very beautiful girl, Tia. Even prettier than some of the English girls I've seen. Why?"

"I have nice body for make love and have babies, yes?" she questioned seriously.

"Well. . . ." He hesitated. He didn't want to lead this child too far until he found out what she had in mind.

"You want to see?" she asked, quickly reaching to loosen the top of her sarong.

"No!" he said, quickly. "My God, Tia. Don't do that. Your father will skin you if he finds

out what you're doing."

"But I must know what is wrong with me," she said, her voice catching in her throat.

"Tia, believe me," Gregg said, very seriously. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with you. Now just what is this all about?"

She put her hands on her hips and thought this over for a few minutes.

"Then he is one mighty dumb bastard," she stated flatly.

"Who?"

"Sean." Her voice was impatient with a slight edge of anger.

"Sean," he repeated stupidly.

"I try to make love with him but he don't do anything. Just look at me like fish with open mouth we pull from ocean. I tell him I make good babies with him but he just don't try. He one, dumb, beautiful bastard, yes?"

Trying desperately not to laugh, Gregg almost choked thinking of aggressive Tia trying to maneuver Sean into a compromising situation.

"Tia, sit here beside me. I'm going to talk to you like an uncle." He patted the ground beside him and she immediately dropped to his side.

"Tia, Sean is not used to girls as uh . . . quick as you are. You see, the girls at home are rather shy and hold a boy's advances off until he asks to marry her. Even then, they have a very formal courtship and hardly even get to hold hands. The girls are very

quiet and reserved. They always have someone else in the room when they are together. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "They pretty, damn stupid, yes? How they know they going to like him if they don't touch until marriage?"

"Girls aren't supposed to think that way," he answered, holding in his laughter with difficulty.

"Oh," she said softly. He could see the wheels of her quick mind working.

"And, . . ." he went on, "they never swear. It's just not ladylike."

"Sean . . . he wants a lady, yes?" she asked. Gregg nodded.

"A lady, she don't swear and she make pretend she don't like, yes?"

Again, he nodded.

Tia rose from his side, her quick laughter returning.

"Then Tia going to be one damn lady, you watch. Thank you, Gregg." She smiled happily and dropped lightly down beside him and gave him a swift kiss. "We name first baby after you, yes?"

Now he could no longer suppress his laughter as she moved swiftly down the beach.

It was usual for Tia to bring their breakfast in to them and Sean always pretended to be asleep when she did. But today was different, as another pretty girl carried the tray in.

"Good morning, Captain Cannon," she said softly.

"Good morning. Where's Tia?"

Sean turned over and looked at her in surprise.

"Tia, she no come no more. She very busy."

Watching Sean from the corner of his eye, Gregg could hardly suppress a smile.

"Thank you very much, uh. . . ."

"Amera," the girl supplied as she left smiling.

Sean got up and they were eating when he looked closely at Gregg. "You don't think Tia's sick, do you?"

"I doubt if that girl ever gets sick, Sean."

"I wonder why she didn't come."

"I guess she's got better things to do."

"Oh."

They ate in silence and Sean left the hut to take a morning swim.

Sean had grown almost as tall as Gregg. His body had filled out considerably. He was slim-hipped and muscular. His body had taken on a bronze glow which made his blue eyes more attractive. He was square chinned and had grown a short beard as shaving was a very difficult thing here. It made him look very masculine and older than his years. Gregg, taking a close look at him for the first time, realized how handsome and sexually attractive he would look to a girl like Tia.

By the time supper was served, he shared it with a rather silent, thoughtful Sean.

Several days passed, each one the same. Tia stayed away from Sean as much as possible, and when she was in his presence, merely smiled and was quiet. Sean had taken to watching for her and seemed disappointed each time she did not appear.

They were seated one night at supper when he asked Gregg quickly, with a rather frustrated look, "Gregg, you think Tia's mad at me for something?"

Gregg shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. "What do you care? She'll get over whatever it is."

This silenced him effectively and he bent his head over his plate and finished his supper in contemplative silence.

When Amera cleaned away the supper dishes, it was customary for them to either go swimming or go to Angus's hut and talk for a few hours before bed. Tonight, instead, Sean threw himself on his bed and, with hands folded behind his head, continued to remain quiet.

Gregg smiled to himself. There was no way for him to offer advice unless Sean asked for it, but he felt it was only a matter of time until he did. He decided to leave and let the boy think things out for himself.

Walking slowly to enjoy the sweet-smelling ocean breeze as it picked up the scent of the ever-blooming island flowers, Gregg made his way to Angus's hut. As usual, Angus was seated outside watching the young people

enjoying the surf. He had a cool drink in his hand and a look of utter contentment on his face. Wordlessly, Gregg dropped down beside him and they sat for a long time in silence, each denying his own thoughts.

Tia was among the young people enjoying the early evening swim. Her happy laughter could be heard floating on the sea air.

"You know, of course, Angus, that Tia's got her heart set on Sean, don't you?" he asked softly.

"Aye, laddie," replied Angus. His eyes sparkled with undisguised humor. "For awhile, I thought it was you."

"Me!"

"Aye. But I know my girl has more wisdom than to give herself to a man who can only think of another. I'm pleased she's chosen Sean. He's a good boy. Now we'll see what he's decided to do." He pointed toward Gregg's hut.

Sean stood in the doorway watching the swimmers. His face was still and he stood there quietly for a long time. Then he moved slowly and purposely toward the beach.

They watched as he walked straight to Tia and stood talking to her for a minute. They couldn't tell what he said for Tia seemed to suddenly turn very still. Sean and Tia stood together another few minutes, then Sean reached for her hand and, together, they walked down the beach and out of sight.

"Angus. . . ."

"Don't worry, laddie. I've told you there's no need to worry about Tia. She knows exactly what she wants and how to get it."

He rose laughing from the ground. "Come on in and have a drink with me. I don't think they'll be back for some time."

Gregg cast another doubtful look in the direction the two young people had gone. Then he shrugged his shoulders. Sean was a man now and no longer needed his protection. Angus had been watching Gregg's face. Now he laughed again as he watched the expression changing and the decision made.

"Very wise, laddie. He'd no forgive ye for interfering now."

They went inside Angus's hut to share a last drink.

Chapter 15

Sean had lain very still after Gregg left the hut, trying to sort out the jumbled emotions he had been feeling lately. The first time Tia had come into their hut, he had thought her truly the most beautiful girl he had ever seen. Each time they met from then on, he had felt himself react physically to her as he had to no other girl before her. But, for some reason, he could not bring himself to talk to her. Maybe, he thought, it was the way she

had of laughing that made him feel so clumsy and ignorant or the masculine way she had of asserting her personality, almost like a sledgehammer blow, that made him feel uncomfortably inadequate. Many times over the past few months, he had steeled himself and tried to talk to her, only to have her swear forcefully at something he did that was foolish.

He did not realize that he was comparing Tia with the only two women he had ever known; and she was bound to come out unfavorably, for she was a completely different kind of a creature, born of a different culture, and could no more have been like his mother or Erin than she could have flown.

Now that she had kept herself away from him for so long, he had begun to realize that he missed her bubbling personality more than even he could understand. The pieces began slowly to fall into place in his mind.

"I must accept her the way she is and not as a copy of my mother or sister," he thought. "I have to either live on her island under her terms or go home with Gregg when the ship comes."

He realized at that moment that he wanted Tia more than anything else in the world and would accept her on any terms she wanted. He rose to his feet and went to the door of his hut and watched her on the beach.

She was laughing as the sea spray washed over her. Her wet sarong clung to the lovely

curves of her long-legged body. The last rays of the evening sun picked up a fiery glow about her long, auburn hair, wet tendrils of which clung to her neck and shoulders.

He straightened up from the doorway and walked slowly and deliberately in her direction. He did not yet know what he was going to say to her when he reached her, but he knew he had to tell her now, somehow, how he felt.

From the corner of her eye she saw him coming and realized his determination by the way he walked. She tried to pay no attention but her nerves were raising little, prickly bumps on her skin, and she felt a warmth creep into her body at the thought of him.

He reached her side and she turned to look up into his eyes.

"Sean?" she said in almost a whisper.

As he looked into her clear, crystal, green eyes, he realized that there was no need for words. "Come, walk with me, Tia?" he asked quietly.

A small shy smile played over her lips as she slowly put her hand in his and they turned to walk down the beach.

They walked together, hand in hand, not speaking for some time. Long after they were out of view, he did not talk, and she began to be afraid that he was going to tell her he was leaving with Gregg. After a few more minutes, he stopped and turned to face her.

"Tia, why have you stayed away from me?"

Tia had never spoken a dishonest word in her life and could not bring herself to do so now. She explained as rapidly as she could talk how Gregg had told her about the way English and Irish girls behaved, and she wanted so much to be a lady and please him.

"Long ago, my papa say I can choose my own man when I find the one that pleases me. When we pull you from boat, and I am wash you all over, I think, 'this one is for me.' I get warm with love for you. But you don't pay attention to me, so I try harder. The more hard I try, the more you go away. Finally, I ask Gregg and he say leave you alone and you make your own mind."

She stopped chattering for a moment and looked up at him. "You make your own mind, Sean? You want Tia the way she want you?"

"Yes, Tia. Maybe even more," he answered. Putting both hands on her waist he pulled her toward him. Laughing happily, she threw her arms about his neck and lifted her lips to his. Her mouth was soft as velvet and tasted slightly salty from the sea. He could feel his head begin to swim as her lips slowly parted under his and her soft, rounded body molded itself against him. His arms tightened about her like two steel bands, causing her to gasp. She pulled a little away from him and looked up at him.

"I cannot make love with you now," she said.

"Tia," he said softly and pulled her back against him. Slowly his hands moved over the soft curves of her body, seeking the fastening of her sarong, and his mouth touched her shoulders lightly, then her throat, cheeks and finally her lips again.

Gently, but firmly, she pushed away from him again.

"No, Sean. Not now."

"Why, Tia? Why? I love you."

"But Gregg say. . . ."

"Gregg!"

"Yes. He say good girl no make love before she make marriage."

Sean, at that moment, would most happily have drowned Gregg in the ocean, among other unpleasant thoughts he had for him.

"Tia, do you love me?"

"Yes, oh yes, Sean."

"Will you marry me tomorrow?"

"Yes. Papa will marry first thing."

"Good," he said firmly. Then he reached down and lifted her from her feet. Holding her so, he kissed her until her senses fled and she clung to him.

"Then for tonight, to hell with Gregg and everything he says."

She gave a delighted trill of laughter and buried her face against his chest as he carried her off the beach and toward the sheltering trees.

When he stepped into their protecting shadows, he set her down beside him and

again he searched for the fastening of her sarong. This time, he found it and dropped the piece of flowered cloth away from her. She stood before him, proud of her beauty and her knowledge that it pleased him. He stood looking at her for a moment.

"Tia, you are so very beautiful," he said.

She gave a little sound of pleasure deep in her throat and stepped into the enclosing circle of his arms. He was wearing only a pair of cut-off pants and her soft breasts pressed against the skin of his chest. He caressed her gently, letting his hands roam over her body, searching discovery, learning, until she sighed and leaned against him for support. He gently lowered himself to the ground, pulling her with him. His hands moved over her fiercely now as his desire for her began to rise to a fever pitch. Her slender fingers caressed the broad muscles of his back and moved over his body, leaving a tingling trail of warmth in their wake. Quickly he rose and removed the pants, throwing them aside.

She whispered his name against his shoulder as he came down against her. He engulfed her completely, taking her mouth with his and absorbing the soft, moaning cry as he entered her for the first time. For just a moment, he paused and lifted his lips from hers but kept himself inside her, waiting for her to move with him when she was ready. Slowly, as the pain passed and the fire began

to build in her, she began to move up against him. Then they began to move together and she cried out his name and clung to him, moving with a fierce, demanding passion that matched his.

For a long time afterward, they lay together, his head against her breasts, his hands gently caressing her.

"Sean?" she asked softly.

"Yes."

"You are going to stay on the island, or do you want me to come home with you?"

There was a slight tremor to her voice and he rose above her and looked down into her eyes.

"No matter what I decide to do, Tia, I would not do it without you. You are as much a part of me now as my heart. We'll be married tomorrow; then *we* will decide what *we* want to do."

She smiled up at him and he bent his head to gently brush her lips with his.

"Let's go for a short swim," he said.

"Short?"

"Yes." He laughed down at her. "I don't want to waste too much time in the water, but I think you need it."

She smiled again as she caught his meaning. Before she could move, he stood up and lifted her gently in his arms. Slowly he walked to the water's edge, then in, until the water was about his knees. He put her down in the warm surf and, kneeling in front of

her, cupped his hands and scooped up water with them and gently washed her body with it.

She stood still until he rose to stand beside her. Now, he took her face between his hands and very gently touched her lips with his. "I love you, Tia."

"And I love you, Sean," she answered with a tremor in her voice.

"Shall we go back now and tell your father?"

She nodded, unable to speak, and they silently gathered their clothes and dressed. Then, hand in hand, they walked back up the beach toward her father's hut.

Gregg stood with Angus and Sean the next afternoon as they waited for Tia to make her appearance. Both men were doing their best to keep hidden their amusement at Sean's nervousness.

From almost dawn, the women of the village had been preparing a wedding feast. Laughter filled the air, along with the scent of millions of flowers they had gathered and strung into necklaces, which hung thickly about everyone's neck, including Sean's and Gregg's.

A pig had been killed, cleaned and buried deeply in a pit of hot coals to roast slowly for the evening's celebration. Fruits had been gathered, and there was an abundance of Angus's home-brewed drink that had contributed its fair share to the gaiety of the

occasion. Sean had refused to drink, but Angus and Gregg were well on their way to being intoxicated even before the ceremony began.

A soft murmur of lightly struck drums echoed throughout the village, and the three men turned to watch the bridal procession approach.

Every single girl in the village walked ahead of Tia and, for some time, Sean could not even see her. One by one, the girls came forward, stopped in front of him and paused for a moment, then turned away.

"What are they doing?" Gregg whispered to Angus.

"They're givin' the laddie a chance to change his mind. It's a custom I found when I got here. After he looks over all the girls, if he still wants Tia, then they're married."

"Is that all there is to it?"

Angus turned and smiled at Gregg. He knew the story of Gregg and Erin.

"What makes the difference with proper place and words, laddie? They're married in heart and soul, and after all, that's where it's really important, isn't it?"

Gregg smiled in remembrance. "Yes, I guess you're right as usual, Angus."

Angus's reply was cut short when, by the look on Sean's face, they could see Tia was coming.

She had wrapped herself in a soft, flowered sarong. There was a garland of white flowers

about her head and one about her neck. She was barefoot and walked slowly with her eyes downcast. She remained so until she stood in front of Sean; then she slowly lifted her eyes to his. He smiled down on her and gently brushed a light kiss across her lips.

At this, pandemonium broke loose and the celebration began in earnest. These people sang and laughed together in such closeness that Gregg was again amazed at their simplicity and honesty. A morose feeling of loneliness overtook him and he could not put thoughts of Erin out of his mind. He began to drink more often of the strange nectar Angus brewed. Angus watched him with pity clouding his eyes as Gregg, finally, at the end of the celebration—when Sean and Tia had gone to their own hut—collapsed from too much nectar and was carried to his hut to sleep it off.

"I hope that ship gets here soon," thought Angus as he watched his people carry Gregg to his hut. "That boy is going to have some hard times if it doesn't come soon."

He lay down to sleep with the nagging worry about Gregg on his mind.

Chapter 16

They were silent as they rode together from the dock, Erin enclosed within herself and thoughts of Gregg, and Mitchell watching her closely, unable to say anything to ease her pain. They were still silent when they arrived at the house and Mitchell helped her down from the carriage. They entered the front door together, and Erin turned to Mitchell. Her eyes were red from weeping and he had never wanted to hold and comfort

her as desperately as he now did.

"I know it's tea time," she said quietly, putting her hand on his arm. "Would you please ask your mother to excuse me, Mitchell? I want to be alone for awhile."

"Of course, Erin. Maybe if you lie down and rest for awhile, you'll feel better. We'll see you at dinner."

She smiled her gratitude and started up the stairs.

"And, Erin?" he called.

She turned to look at him.

He smiled up at her. "Gregg will be all right. And six months is not forever although it may feel so now."

"Thank you, Mitchell. I'll see you at dinner."

She went on up the stairs and he watched until he heard her door close. Still, he stood watching the stairway but not really seeing it. A terrible thought had crossed his mind and he was stunned with the force of it. What if something "should happen" to his brother? God! What am I thinking? He knew he would never be able to live with his conscience if he continued to think this way. He shook away the thoughts and went to join his mother for tea.

Erin closed the door of her bedroom behind her. "It is quiet; so quiet," she thought. Slowly, she removed her dress and washed her face and hands. Then she dressed again in a pale green and white gown and sat

quietly on the edge of her bed for a few minutes. She fingered lightly a small, golden cross about her neck that Gregg had given her.

"Please, God," she whispered to herself. "Keep him safe. He is my whole life. I love him so much. And please," she added, "let me be carrying his child now."

Finally, she rose from the bed and made her way slowly down the stairs to the dining room. Mitchell and his parents were just being seated at the table when she arrived. Mitchell silently slid out her chair for her and she sat down, but she felt no desire for food.

Dinner, for the most part, was a very quiet, strained affair. For awhile, Jenny tried to keep up a light conversation but it slowly failed.

"Erin," asked Mitchell, "would you like to go riding with me tomorrow morning? I would like to show you a new branch of the river I just discovered. It's very beautiful."

"Yes, Erin," spoke up Thomas Cannon. "It would do you a lot of good to get out and be active. We can't let a pretty thing like you wilt while Gregg's gone, can we? He would never forgive us."

"Say you'll go, Erin," pleaded Mitchell.

Jenny was strangely quiet as she watched Erin intently. She was absolutely certain that Erin had no idea of Mitchell's feelings. She drew herself tight with determination.

She was going to speak to Mitchell after dinner. She must stop this before it got a chance to develop dangerously.

"All right, Mitch. We'll go first thing in the morning," answered Erin, quietly.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "I'll have Margaret pack us a lunch. I know a perfect place for a picnic. Oh, by the way, mother. It's too late to cancel the party so we'll just have to go on with it."

Jenny frowned at him, one of the few times in her life she had shown such displeasure at one of her own or at her own plans.

"Yes," she said slowly. "I imagine we will have to." She looked intently at her son. "I'm sure it would be quite difficult for Erin. If you'd rather not, my dear, I could give everyone your regrets."

"Nonsense, mother," interrupted Mitchell. "Erin needs some friends about to brighten up her evenings, and I, for one, am looking forward to a dance or two with my beautiful, new sister." He turned to Erin. "Don't disappoint me, Erin, please."

Erin smiled at him. He was so like Gregg when he wanted something. His blue eyes lit with the same bright laughter. Thinking of Gregg made her say yes without even realizing what she was doing. Mitchell seemed positively happy by the time dinner was over.

Erin rose from the table. "If you all would excuse me please, I've a headache and I think I will retire early."

"Of course, my dear," smiled Jenny Cannon. Then she turned to Mitchell. "Mitchell, I would like to talk to you if you don't mind?"

They were quiet until Erin left the room. Then Mitchell turned to his mother.

"Let me put your fears to rest, Mother. I, too, love my brother and I would not do anything to hurt him. Yes, I love Erin and, while Gregg is gone, I will spend as much time with her as I possibly can. But, I will never say anything to her, nor will I ever do anything that I know would destroy our family. Does that help to ease your mind, mother?"

He looked at her with such deep sorrow in his eyes that it was like a knife twisting in her heart. Without being able to speak, and with tears glistening in her eyes, she slowly nodded her head.

He rose wearily from the chair and, with a softly murmured "Good night," left the room.

For a long time, neither Jenny nor Thomas spoke.

"Jenny, there is nothing more he can do. Have some pity for him, too."

"I cannot. I love them all so dearly, and I know as surely as I breathe, that Mitchell will not be able to refrain forever from telling Erin how he feels. There will come a day when he will not be able to hold himself in check. Then what? What will she do, torn between two such men? And what will they

do to each other? Oh, Thomas, I cannot bear it. We must do something."

Thomas Cannon kept silent for some time, then he said, "Jenny, could you stand to have both your sons at sea at the same time?"

"Why? What are you thinking?"

"The *Golden Eagle* is still without a captain. If we needed it very desperately, I would ask Mitchell to take her on her next trip. Then the temptation would be gone for all of them. But you would have both our sons at sea at the same time. Think about it, my love, and after the party, we will make our decision, all right?"

Erin dressed slowly the next morning. She felt a deep lethargy smothering her. "I cannot go on like this all the time Gregg is gone. I'm sure his family misses him as desperately as I do," she thought. Straightening her shoulders, she left the room and started down the stairs.

Mitchell was waiting for her and smiled warmly as she approached.

"I've a lunch all ready, and the day promises to be beautiful. We should have a great time." He extended his hand to her as she descended the last few steps, and she reached for it automatically. He tucked her hand under his arm and, with the basket in his hand, they left the house and walked slowly to the stables where a boy was saddling their horses.

Jenny stood at the library window and

watched them walk across the lawn. She continued to watch as the two figures on horseback left and rode into the hills. Then, with a deep sigh and a premonition of the future, she turned away from the window.

Erin and Mitchell rode together in silence for some time. Then, she caught herself drifting back to her old lethargy and she turned to Mitchell laughing. "I'll race you to the trees," she shouted as she kicked her heels against the horse's flanks. It obediently surged ahead and she heard Mitchell's answering shout as he raced after her. He caught up with her as they reached the line of trees forming a heavily wooded area.

"You're an excellent horsewoman, Erin," he laughed, "but you had the advantage of surprise."

She laughed happily for the first time since Gregg had left and it lifted his spirits to hear her.

"Where is this beautiful place you told me about, Mitch? I'm anxious to see it."

"It's only about an hour's ride from here but we'll have to go single file now through the trees. There's a path there. Do you see it?" He pointed to the edge of the trees where a path could be seen entering the woods. She nodded and turned her horse toward the path.

They followed the winding, twisting path for well over an hour when suddenly, they

broke from the woods at the top of a hill overlooking the most beautiful sight. Erin caught her breath at the beauty of it. The early morning sun had not yet risen completely above the trees so that bright rays of sunlight filtered through the green branches. Dew was still fresh on the rolling green hill as it slanted down to a narrow river of crystal-clear water. The banks sloped gradually down to the river's edge.

"Oh, Mitchell! It is so beautiful and peaceful here."

"I know," he answered quietly. "I come here often. It's one of my favorite spots. I intend to build a house here one day. Oh, not anything as grand as my parents', but a small house, to share with the right girl and raise children in this place of beauty."

"She'll be so lucky, Mitchell. You are such a wonderful person and this spot is close to heaven."

"Do you think so, Erin, really?"

"I love it. I just wish. . . ."

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm feeling sorry for myself again. Missing Gregg, wishing I could have something like this." She nudged her horse on and moved toward the river.

"Maybe you will, my dear," he said, too softly for her to hear. "Maybe you will."

They tethered their horses and walked beside the river for awhile as he talked to her of his plans for his home and how he had

discovered this haven. She listened intently to him and he found himself talking and confiding his dreams to her as he had never done with another person. He realized suddenly just how hard it was going to be to want Erin so badly and be near her so closely without being able to speak. But he also knew he would never let go of a minute he could spend with her.

"Mitchell, I'm starved. What are you carrying in that treasure chest of a basket?" she asked laughing.

"Ah, madam! I have wondrous goodies here and, if you wait until I spread the blanket, I will be delighted to share them with you."

The rest of the afternoon went by too rapidly to suit Mitch. Long before he was ready to relinquish her, Erin turned to him. "It's getting late, Mitch. We'd better start back."

He nodded his agreement and as she gathered their things together, he went to get the horses, which he had unsaddled and tethered to crop the green grass. It took him some time to get them saddled and, when he returned, Erin was sitting quietly, deep in thought. It hurt him to know that she was deep in thoughts of Gregg, and he made a sound deep in his throat which broke her reverie.

"Oh, Mitch," she laughed and rose to go to his side.

He placed both hands at her waist to lift her into the saddle and was startled at the tingling of warmth through her clothes.

She placed a hand on his shoulder as he effortlessly lifted her into the saddle. For a moment, their eyes met and held, and she was completely shocked at what she saw there.

She was silent all the way home. "I'm wrong," she thought. "Wrong to think that of Gregg's brother. I know it is impossible, it's just my imagination."

By the time they arrived home, she was under control and determined to dismiss the whole idea from her mind.

Chapter 17

Erin looked again at the beautiful gown lying across her bed. She could not really believe this beautiful thing belonged to her, that it was made especially for her. It was the soft blending of colors in the material that fascinated her. They seemed to flow together like water in different shades, going from pink to orchid. Although the dress was plainly made, off the shoulder with a fitted bodice and full, swaying skirt, nothing had

been added to it to take away from the flowing colors.

Excitement throbbed in her at the thought of her first, real party. She was excited and happy so she hummed softly to herself as she started her toilette. She stood and looked at herself in the mirror. She had been out riding so often in the past three weeks that her skin had taken on a healthy, golden tan, bringing out in startling relief the color of her eyes.

"What shall I do with my hair, Polly?" she asked the young girl who was helping her dress. "Wear it in a cluster of curls like this?" she asked, as she lifted her long hair to the top of her head with both hands.

"Oh, no, ma'am. If you'll let me, I'll do it special for you. With that gown, you shouldn't wear it all fussy like that. Can I try for you, ma'am?"

Erin smiled gratefully and sat down in front of her dressing table. Polly moved behind her and, with deft fingers, began to manipulate her hair in tightly wound coils at the back of her head, pulling it straight back from her forehead. When she finished, Erin was amazed at herself. It made her look cool and regal.

"Polly, you are marvelous!" she exclaimed, to Polly's shy embarrassment. "Now, do you suggest I wear anything in my hair or any jewelry?"

"Just your pink pearls and small earrings,

ma'am. It's enough, and nothing in your hair."

When they had finished everything else, Polly helped her into the gown and, after fastening it, moved around in front of her and surveyed her with a critical eye. "You will probably be the most beautiful lady here tonight," she said sincerely.

Erin moved to the mirror and looked at the reflection she saw there. "This can't be me!" she thought. The woman who stared back at her was no longer the little, Irish orphan Gregg had brought home. Instead, before her stood a sophisticated, mature woman. The golden glow of her shoulders and breasts rising from the soft colors of the gown made her look startlingly lovely, and the severity of her hair made her eyes the most commanding view of her person. "Oh, Gregg," she thought, "I had this dress made just for you. How I wish you were here!"

"Ma'am," interrupted Polly, "the guests are arriving. They'll expect you downstairs soon. Is there anything else I can do for you?"

She smiled at the girl. "No, thank you, Polly. I really appreciate your help. I don't know what I would have done without you."

"Thank you, Miss Erin . . . it was a pleasure to help someone as nice as you," she said quickly and, dropping a quick curtsy, was gone before Erin could reply.

Erin touched a small dab of perfume behind each ear and at her wrists and throat.

Then, satisfied, she left the room, closing the door quietly behind her.

When she came to the top of the large staircase, she began to descend very slowly, looking about for a familiar face. She did not at once see Mitchell standing in the doorway, but he saw her immediately.

With a soft intake of breath between his teeth, he watched her slowly move down the steps. She was so lovely that he felt the familiar tightening in his chest and the quick rush of heat to his body that he always felt whenever he saw her. Quickly masking his emotions, he moved from the doorway, where he had been deliberately waiting for her, and walked to the foot of the stairs and watched her continue her descent. She smiled warmly at him and took the hand he extended to her.

"Erin, you are very, very, lovely tonight."

"Thank you, Mitchell."

"Will you save me the first waltz?" he asked, smiling down at her.

"Of course."

"And the last?" he asked again softly.

She looked up at him closely, trying to read his thoughts. There was no hint of any emotion except friendliness in his face but, still, she could not quiet the fluttering feeling in her chest.

"Yes."

"Good!" he exclaimed happily. "Now, let's go in and scare all the other women to death," he laughed.

She laughed with him at his delightful compliment and, tucking her hand under his arm, they moved toward the sound of music. It wasn't long after he entered the room with her that she was whisked away from him and onto the dance floor.

Erin had not enjoyed anything so much in her life, with the exception of the night she and Gregg were married. Young men from all over the county were falling all over themselves to dance with her or bring her a cool drink and bask in her beautiful presence. Mitchell claimed her for the first waltz. They did not speak as he whirled her about the floor and, too soon, it was over and he relinquished her reluctantly to another's arms, reminding her with a smile that the last waltz was his.

Some time later, Erin felt the need of some fresh air and, slipping out the French doors, she walked across the balcony and stood in the shadows watching the rise of the full, yellow moon. She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply of the warm air. She had drunk too much champagne and she knew it, for she felt slightly light-headed. There was a bench in the corner and she dropped gratefully on it and relaxed quietly, listening to the music.

The soft swishing of a gown across the stone terrace caused her to open her eyes. Before her were Mitchell and Diane Morgan, a girl from town whom Jenny had introduced

her to. The two girls had taken a liking to one another and were rapidly becoming friends.

For a few moments, Erin did not know what to do. She did not want to embarrass either of them and, after they began to talk to one another, she realized it was too late to move.

"I haven't seen you for so long, Mitch. Where have you been keeping yourself?"

"Oh, I've really been busy, Diane. Since Gregg is gone, there's quite a bit more for me to do."

"You've been neglecting me, you cad," she laughed softly.

Mitch chuckled and slipped his arm about her and kissed her lightly on the mouth. Before he could raise his head, she put her arms about his neck and moved against him. Mitchell put his hands on her waist and moved her away from him, gently but firmly. "Diane, . . ." he began.

She stood looking at him, then suddenly, her eyes filled with tears.

"I knew, I knew all this time. I just wanted to prove it to myself one way or another," she said.

"Knew what, Diane?" he asked.

"I felt you were slipping away from me, Mitch, and I didn't know why until tonight."

"Now what could have happened tonight?" he asked, with a slight smile on his lips.

"I watched your face as you danced with her."

"Her?"

"Erin," she said softly.

The smile faded from his mouth and he stood speechless for a moment. "Don't be ridiculous, Diane. She's my brother's wife."

"No matter, Mitch. You love her. It's written all over you every time you're near her. I'm surprised she hasn't seen it herself."

"Diane. . . ."

"Please, Mitch. Don't take me for a fool. Don't try to deny it to me—I know you so well."

His shoulders sagged a little and he turned to look out over the garden. There was a closed tight look of pain about his mouth. "No, we've been friends too long for me to deny it," he said, quietly. He did not see the look of pity and pain that crossed her face for when he turned back to her, it was well covered.

"I loved her, I think almost from the moment she arrived. And I love my brother." He gave a hoarse, grating, little laugh. "What do I do about a situation like this, Diane?" he asked. Then he repeated softly, almost to himself, "I'm at the end of my rope. What do I do now?"

"You know you can never have her, Mitch. Why don't you settle for second best?"

"Second best?"

"Me."

"Diane. . . ."

"Don't interrupt for a minute, Mitch. Let

me say this before my pride gets in the way. I love you. I always have since we were children. I always will. I'll take you on any terms I can get you. Think about that, along with the fact that you are not the type of man to come between your brother and his wife."

She moved close to him and put both hands on his face. "I love you, Mitchell Cannon." Then she lifted her mouth to his and kissed him tenderly. He put his arms about her for a moment, then, when she stepped back, he looked deeply into her eyes. She could not stand the pain-filled look in his eyes as she realized that Erin's hold on him would be almost impossible to break. She gave a smothered sob, which she disguised as a small laugh. "Dance me back into the ballroom, Mitch, before we are both hopelessly bound by words we should not say." He nodded and wordlessly took her into his arms and they reentered the ballroom.

Erin sat frozen on the bench. Her scattered thoughts whirled about in her brain. "Mitchell, oh, Mitchell," she cried silently. "I only wish I could love you. You are such a wonderful man. What will I do? What can I say to him now? He must never know that I know."

She rose, suddenly weary, and decided she would go to her room and go to bed. The party had suddenly lost its luster.

She stepped through the door and, suddenly, the music stopped playing. There was

a loud commotion at the door and a startled cry brought her running in that direction.

When she arrived at the front door, she saw Thomas Cannon, gray-faced, holding Jenny against his shoulder as she cried violently. Mitchell stood there, his face white and drawn, his mouth a grim line. They were talking to a man, dressed as a sailor, who was nervously twisting his hat in his hand.

Chapter 18

She had cried all the tears she had in her, and now she lay exhausted, curled in a small ball in their big four-poster bed. Someone came in with a candle and she feigned sleep. She could not bear to talk to anyone. The wound was too fresh and too deep for her to probe it yet. She heard a soft sigh from the person who stood over her and she knew it was Gregg's mother, Jenny. She stood over the bed for a few minutes, then she left. Erin

could hear the faint click of the door as she closed it softly behind her.

Her eyes felt swollen and irritated and so heavy she could barely open them. Her throat was sore from the anguish that had racked her when she had opened her eyes to see Gregg's mother bending worriedly over her.

"It's not true," she had whispered. "Tell me it's not true." Jenny's look of pain was more than she could bear and she turned her face to the wall and cried.

The first gray light of dawn found her awake, and she watched as the beaming rays of the morning sun cut through the clouds. Somehow, she felt that she could not bear a bright, sunlit day and she turned away from the window and buried her face in the pillow. No more tears would come, instead there came the realization that she would have to face a lifetime of days and nights without Gregg. She felt a panic born of desperate loneliness and, for one brief moment, contemplated a dreadful thought of ending her own life. She became frightened at the twisting of her mind and realized she had to do something before these insidious thoughts planted themselves too deeply. Slowly, she rose from the bed and, with listless movements, she dressed. Then she plaited her hair and left the room without even looking at herself in the mirror, for she did not care about her appearance at this moment.

She moved slowly down the stairs on feet that felt leaden. The murmuring sound of voices came from the dining room. Jenny, Thomas and Mitchell were at breakfast, and Jenny rose swiftly from her chair and went to Erin's side when she saw her in the doorway. For a few minutes the two women looked at each other, each sharing the burden of the other's grief.

"Oh, Erin, my child," said Jenny softly and embraced her. "Come, sit down with us. It is so good to see you up. You had us quite worried."

Neither Thomas nor Mitchell had spoken but their eyes reflected the sorrow they saw in her face, combined with the deep pity they felt for her.

Erin sat down at the table with them but found it impossible to eat. She spoke very little through breakfast. Her mind seemed to drift away from conversation, and several times she had to be spoken to twice before a listless reply was forthcoming. She turned once to Thomas Cannon with a softly asked question.

"How long . . . ?" she began and her voice choked in her throat. She licked her dry lips and began again. "Papa Cannon, how long has it been since . . . I mean, when?" She ceased being able to speak.

"I know what you mean, child," he answered sympathetically. "Don't punish yourself unnecessarily, Erin."

"I must know," she answered.

He gave a small sigh. "All right, my dear, but it seems to me it would only be more painful."

"No, I can't bear the not knowing, the thought that I would never know where and how it happened. Just that he is gone forever is not enough. Do you understand?"

Jenny Cannon left her seat and went to Erin's side. Placing her hand on Erin's shoulder, she looked at her husband. "Tell her everything you know about it, Thomas. She has a right to know."

Erin looked up at her gratefully, then turned her eyes toward Thomas Cannon. After a few moments, he began to speak.

"One of my ships, *The Godolphin*, arrived in port last week. They had picked up several survivors of the . . . *Amy C.*"

Erin's eyes never left his but her face remained immobile.

"I went down to speak to them personally. They told me the story. It happened about two weeks out. They were becalmed for several days and the air was filled with a strange kind of stillness. It was difficult to breathe, one man said. That night, it struck, a huge wave over fifty feet high, caused, I'm told, by an eruption of a volcano on one of the islands. Sean and Gregg were on the quarter-deck along with one of Gregg's men, a Mr. Cotton. After the wave struck, one of the survivors was clinging to a miraculously

saved lifeboat when he found the other two. Together, they turned the boat over and climbed in. They were afloat without food or water for some time." He paused.

"There is a chance the same could have happened to Gregg and Sean, isn't there?" she asked hopefully.

"Erin, the man said the water was filled with debris. I doubt if two lifeboats could have escaped the tremendous power that wave must have held."

"But it could have happened," she whispered hopefully. "They could have clung to some wreckage. Maybe another ship has picked them up."

"Stop it, child," he said quietly. "Don't do that to yourself."

"But I must, Papa Cannon," she said. "I cannot feel that he is gone. I would know . . . I would know." Her voice died away but her eyes held him bound. There was a deadening silence, then Erin rose slowly from the table and left the room.

"Go with her, Jenny. Stay with her as much as you can. When the shock wears away, the real pain will begin."

Jenny nodded and followed Erin from the room.

"Father?" asked Mitchell, "do you think she could be right? Could they have clung to some wreckage and been found?"

Thomas Cannon looked at his oldest son. The older man's face had taken on a gray cast

and dark shadows filled his eyes. He suddenly looked old to Mitchell.

"I didn't tell the rest of the story because I did not want either Erin or your mother to hear."

"What rest?"

"The men told me that the waters in that area are filled with sharks. There were some other survivors, but they did not survive long."

"Oh, father, that is horrible."

"Yes. I would rather believe your brother died in the wreck and not after." His voice died and both men sat silent, contemplating the horror of what must have happened.

Jenny followed Erin to her room and, when her knock was not answered, she opened the door anyway and went in. At first, she did not see her, then she saw her standing just outside the large, French doors leading to the veranda. She went to her. "Erin?"

Erin turned to face her. There was a firm, drawn tightness about her mouth.

"Please forgive me, Mama Cannon. I did not mean to be rude, but I will not believe Gregg is dead. I tell you, I would know, I would know."

"Yes, Erin, I know how you feel."

"What?"

"We will keep our strength up together, my child, for I, too, do not believe he is dead."

With a soft, moaning cry, Erin threw herself into Jenny's arms and cried. Jenny

held her and, stroking her hair, made soothing sounds until Erin could get her grief under control.

Then she took Erin by the shoulders and held her away from her and looked at her. "You must take care of yourself, child. You would not want Gregg to come back and find you looking like this, would you?"

Erin gave a negative shake of her head and straightened her shoulders. Lifting her chin, she looked into Jenny's understanding eyes. "I'll be all right now," she said.

"Good," smiled Jenny. She turned to leave when Erin reached out and held her arm.

"Mama Cannon?"

"Yes, Erin."

"I have to talk to you about something; something very important that concerns the whole family."

Jenny turned again to look at her. "Do you mean the fact that Mitchell is in love with you?" she asked softly.

"You knew?"

"I knew probably before you did," Jenny replied softly. "Probably even before Mitchell knew himself."

"What am I to do about it?"

Jenny sighed. "I don't know, Erin, I truly don't know. But, together, we will find a way. Remember, I'm here if you need me."

"Yes, I know," Erin smiled. "Do you also know that Diane Morgan is desperately in love with Mitchell?"

Jenny smiled.

"Of course you do."

"She has loved him since he was eight and she was six and he tormented her something dreadful. I only wish. . . ."

"Wish what?"

"Erin, you and I know that one does not turn love off and on at will. I would like it to be but I doubt if Mitchell even sees Diane like that. For the time being, don't let Mitchell know that you know. I don't believe he will speak for quite some time under the circumstances. In the meantime, you can get yourself together and we will be able to handle the situation." Erin nodded her head in agreement.

"I know it is impossible to smile, Erin, but keep the hope deep in the back of your mind that everything will resolve itself as the good Lord intends it. Hope can do miracles if you let it." She kissed her on the cheek and left the room, quietly closing the door behind her.

Erin stood still for a long time after Jenny left her. She knew she was right but, oh, it was going to be so hard, so hard. She opened the door of the cupboard wherein hung the clothes that Gregg had left behind. She took one of his coats from inside and crumpled it in her arms, holding it tightly and burying her face in the folds of the material.

"Gregg," she whispered. "Wherever you are, hear me. I love you. I shall always love you. If it is possible, come back to me. Dear

God, if it is not possible, at least, let me have his child." She kept her face buried in the jacket for a long time before she could bear to hang it back in the cupboard and close the door.

Chapter 19

Erin awoke a week later, early in the morning, with irrefutable truth that she was not pregnant. It was the last straw, and she turned her face into the pillow and cried. It was like this that Polly found her when she brought in her breakfast tray. She set the tray down quickly and ran to Erin's side and grasped her hand.

"Oh, don't cry so, ma'am. What is wrong? I can't bear to hear you cry like that. Shall I get

Miz Cannon?" She turned to go.

"No," sobbed Erin. "Wait, Polly. Don't tell Mama Cannon. I will be all right. It's just. . . ."

"Just what?"

"Just that I wanted his child so desperately and now I shall have nothing of him; nothing."

Polly became nervous and upset at Erin's tears and tried again to get her help. "Let me go get Miz Cannon," she said, miserably. "She'd know what to do."

"No, Polly." Erin sat up in the bed and wiped the tears from her face with the corner of the sheet. "I'll be all right now. It's just that. . . . Oh, Polly, I feel so . . . so . . . empty."

Polly watched her with sympathy. She loved Erin almost as a sister and would have given anything to take away the pain she saw in her eyes.

Erin rose from the bed. Setting her jaw firmly, she said, "Lay out my riding clothes, Polly, and get water for my bath."

"Yes, ma'am."

After her bath, Erin dressed rapidly and gathered her hair. She plaited it in one, long braid carelessly. When she was finished, she did not stop to look in the mirror. She moved rapidly down the stairs and was just at the front door when a voice stopped her.

"Erin!"

She turned from the door. Jenny was standing in the doorway of the dining room.

Behind her stood Diane Morgan.

"Diane has ridden over for a visit."

Erin moved slowly in their direction. The last thing she wanted in her emotional state was to sit and chat over a cup of tea, but they did just that for almost an hour. Erin's nerves were taut by the time Diane rose to leave and she felt the desperate urge to get away.

With a hasty excuse to Jenny, she quickly left the house and headed for the stable. When the horse was saddled, she rode aimlessly for awhile, letting the horse go at his will. It was quite some time before she came to the realization of where they were. The horse had retraced an often-ridden path, whether it was the remembrance of the sweet grass growing there or just that he had traveled there before.

She came out of her reverie when the horse came to a complete stop and lowered his head to nibble at the grass. It was that lovely, secluded spot Mitchell had brought her to the day they had gone on the picnic. She stepped down and surveyed the spot again. It was so very peaceful, as though nothing of the outer world had ever penetrated it. She tethered the horse so that it could graze and walked slowly down across the swaying green grass to the river. There she sat under the shade of the tree where she and Mitchell had shared their lunch. She listened to the soft, calling sounds of the birds and the gentle, rushing

sound the river made as it swirled along beneath her.

Her mind went back slowly over the last year. The loss of her parents, then the terrible attack by Charles. When she thought back on it, she felt a small twinge of pity for him. Then Gregg, wonderful Gregg. Sweeping her off her feet and literally carrying her away to a whole new life. She closed her eyes and let the warm memories creep over her like a blanket.

She must have dozed off for the sudden, alarming feeling of another presence brought her suddenly awake. She sat up quickly, startled and blurry-eyed from sleep, and looked up to see Mitchell standing just a few feet from her, looking down on her.

"Mitchell!"

"I'm sorry, Erin. I didn't mean to startle you. I didn't know you were asleep." He looked down at her. Fresh from sleep with her hair disheveled and her beautiful eyes wide with surprise, she seemed like a vision to him. "She is the most beautiful thing in this world," he thought. "I want her so much." The thought was pushed quickly to the back of his mind as he remembered the short passage of time since she had heard about Gregg.

He sat down slowly beside her. He did not want to alarm her. "It is a beautiful spot in which to gather your thoughts, isn't it?" He smiled at her.

She sighed and raised herself up to lean back against the trunk of the huge tree. "Yes," she said, softly.

"I've done the same myself in the past few days. You see, Gregg and I. . . ." He paused, and she turned to look at him. "Tell me, Mitch. Tell me about Gregg. We had so little time together, I didn't get to know all the things I wanted to. Tell me."

He tried not to show the pain her words caused him. "I don't want to make things any harder for you than they already are, Erin."

"Mitchell, you and Gregg were very close, weren't you?"

He nodded his head.

"You must have so many beautiful things to remember. Share them with me, Mitch," she said softly and leaned forward to put her hand on his arm, her eyes looking pleadingly into his. "Please."

"All right," he said and lay back in the soft grass with his hands behind his head. She listened intently as he began talking. He told her of their entire childhood in detail, sometimes rousing her to laughter over some of their escapades. She learned of his gentle humor and some of the mischievous deeds they were involved in. After he had talked for some time, he became silent, lost in his own memories. Neither of them spoke for a long time, but both were contented with the slight easing of their grief.

Reluctantly, she stirred and looked up at

him as he rose slowly from the ground and stood over her. He extended his hand to her and she put her hand in his. Slowly, he pulled her to her feet. They stood inches apart.

"Erin?"

"It's time to go back, Mitch," she said softly. "And we will not come back here together," she added, in a voice that was almost a whisper. Then she turned away and walked slowly through the tall grass to her horse. Without looking back, she mounted and urged her horse on the path toward home.

He stood and watched her slender form move away from him. When she mounted her horse and left, he still stood immobile. He had felt, even if she would not recognize it for what it was, the tingling feeling of response to his unasked question. His heart had surged at the swift look that had been in her eyes in that one unguarded moment. "There is tomorrow, Erin, my love, and all the tomorrows after. I will not let that moment die. I will fan it until it burns in a blaze as high as my own."

His thoughts went to his brother. If Gregg was alive, he would never speak of his feelings to Erin, and maybe someday he would even have left. He felt a great sorrow at the loss of the brother who had been so close to him for so long, but he knew in spite of everything, he could never smother completely the desire he felt for Erin. With

dragging steps, he walked to his horse and rode slowly home.

The weeks passed, rolling into each other until to Erin, they became a blur in time. She rose early in the morning, sometimes even before dawn. The nights were restless and dream-filled and she could sometimes not even bear the thought of them. Often, she rode early. Sometimes, she would simply walk through the gardens, seeking the peace she could not seem to find. She tried her best to avoid contact with Mitch as much as possible; efforts he recognized but did not try to stop. She had taken to riding over to Diane's and spending time with her. The two girls were becoming good friends.

It was on just such a visit that the subject of Mitchell Cannon came up. Erin had ridden over in the early afternoon and Diane had met her at the door. She had invited her upstairs to see a new gown she had just bought. Erin exclaimed over the beauty of the lovely gown and the two girls laughed and chatted happily together.

"Is the gown for the Prestons' Ball next month?" asked Erin.

"Yes," Diane replied. "But I'm really not enthused about going."

"Why, I had always taken you for a person who loved parties and people."

Diane shrugged her shoulders but did not voice her thoughts.

"Diane, why don't you want to go?" Erin asked softly. But she already knew the answer to her question. Still, Diane did not answer but sat on the edge of the bed and ran her hand slowly up and down the smooth folds of the gown.

"Mitchell Cannon?" asked Erin.

Diane looked directly into Erin's eyes and knew without reservation that Erin knew how she felt about Mitch. Without speaking, she nodded her head.

"Do you want to tell me about it?"

"No, Erin," she laughed. "I could probably tell anyone in the world except you."

"You mean because of the way Mitch feels about me?"

At this, Diane looked up at her in complete surprise.

"You know how he feels about you?"

"Yes. I've known for some time, but it is impossible for me to feel anything for someone else when I feel so strongly that Gregg is still alive and will come back to me."

"And if that doesn't happen, Erin, what then? What if you never see him again and one day there is room for someone else? You know all you have to do is crook your little finger and he would be there. You know it and I know it. I suppose I should hate you. You are the only thing that stands between me and what I want most in life, but you make it impossible to do so. I care for you as a

friend and I want Mitch as a husband. Somewhere, I am bound to lose one of you."

Erin went to her and embraced her, kissing her on the cheek. "There is no necessity for you to lose either one of us. I do not love Mitchell, Diane, and I intend to stay away from him as much as possible until he comes to his senses and realizes what a wonderful person he has in you."

"Then. . . ."

"You go to the Prestons' Ball. I'm staying home."

"But. . . ."

"I never intended to go from the beginning. I've no desire to go to a ball without Gregg."

"Oh, Erin." Diane laughed and hugged her excitedly. "You are so much like a sister to me."

The two girls spent a happy afternoon, laughing and talking together, planning on how Diane should wear her hair and which perfume she should use. It was getting close to dinner time when Erin exclaimed, "I must go, Diane! Mama Cannon will be anxious about me." She gathered her things and prepared to leave.

"Erin," said Diane, "thank you."

Erin smiled at her and left. She felt contented for the first time in a long time on the ride home. When she arrived home, she went to her room and took up the gown she had bought for the Prestons' Ball. With a smile, she placed it back in the box and closed

the lid. Then she took the box to her trunk and, opening the lid, she put it inside. "I shall not need this now." Firmly, she closed the lid and began to prepare for dinner.

Chapter 20

Mitchell was furiously angry and had no one to vent his anger on. He was dressing now for the ball at the Prestons'. For the third time, he tore loose his cravat and retied it with a resounding curse. For over eight months he had allowed Erin to stay away from him. Like a shadow she had been, as dark and elusive. He had planned on dancing with her at the ball where there was no way of her escaping him. It was only at din-

ner that she announced that she had changed her mind and decided not to go. For a few minutes after she made the statement, he had stared at her in amazement. It had never occurred to him that she would not be there.

"But why, Erin?" he had asked in a voice more filled with dismay than he wanted.

"I just don't feel like going to a party so soon," she said softly, but she averted her eyes from him, as his mother did when he turned to look at her.

Erin excused herself quickly and left the room. When she was outside the door, she lifted her skirts and ran upstairs to her room in fear that he would follow her.

Mitchell turned to his mother. "Was this her idea or yours?" he asked angrily.

"Mitchell, you will not address your mother in that manner," said his father.

He looked at his father for a moment, then controlled his anger. "I'm sorry, father, mother. I have to know was it her idea or yours?"

"Hers," said his mother, softly.

"Good," he answered, just as quietly, and turned to leave the room, while his parents watched him in surprise.

"If she runs from me, it means she's afraid," he thought to himself as he went up the stairs to dress. "Soon, I'll find out if it's me or herself she's afraid of."

Erin watched from her window as the

carriage bearing Mr. and Mrs. Cannon and Mitchell left, then she turned away and threw herself across the bed and cried. The tears gave way finally to dry sobs and then to exhausted sleep. She did not know how long she slept but she was awakened by a knock on her door.

"Yes?"

"It's me, Miz Erin. Polly."

"Just a moment."

She rose and splashed some cool water on her face and straightened her hair and dress, then she opened the door for Polly.

"I've come to tell you that Miz Cannon gave all the servants the evening out. If you want me to, I'll stay with you."

Erin looked at her slightly flushed face and bright eyes.

"I suppose that young Graham boy has asked you out?" she laughed.

"Yes, ma'am, but I'd be perfectly happy to stay with you. You shouldn't be left in this big house all alone."

"Oh, Polly, don't be ridiculous. Go and have a good time. No one is going to bother me here. I promise I'll lock myself in my room and not let anyone near me until you get back."

"Well, I don't know, Miz Erin. If Miz Cannon knew I left you all alone, she'd be mighty mad at me."

"She'll never know from me, Polly, and I'm sure they won't be back until the wee hours of

the morning. By that time, I'll be fast asleep."

"Well. . . ."

"Oh, go on, Polly. One of us should have some fun. Tell me all about it tomorrow."

Polly smiled a quick, grateful smile and kissed Erin quickly on the cheek. "Thank you, Miz Erin."

Erin chuckled to herself as she closed the door behind Polly and obediently locked it. She felt restless and still did not want to leave the room. She removed her clothes and washed herself in the cool water in the basin, for she felt uncomfortably warm. She wrapped herself in a loose gown and began to brush her hair, letting her mind go back over the last month.

She had tried her best to stay away from Mitchell, and she could still remember the surprise and hurt in his eyes at dinner when she told them she wasn't going. She was amazed at herself that the look in his eyes had caused so much feeling in her. She stopped brushing and looked at herself in the mirror. "What is the matter with you, Erin Cannon? Are you a wanton woman that you must always have a man in your bed? What of Gregg? If he's still alive?"

She threw the brush on the dresser and blew out the candles. Then she went to the window and opened it wide. Light, skittering clouds were passing rapidly in front of a full, white moon. The air was very still and there were no ordinary night sounds. "It must be

going to rain," she thought. Without closing the windows, she went back and lay across her bed, watching the clouds gather. After awhile, she slept.

A loud banging crash brought her awake suddenly. A low, growling, rumble of thunder could be heard in the distance and a strong wind was billowing the curtains of the window straight out. The shutter was being slammed with great force open and shut. She jumped from the bed and ran to the windows. Leaning out, she grasped the shutters and had to strain against the force of the wind to get them closed and locked.

She stood breathing heavily from the exertion when a splintering crash and the sound of breaking glass echoed from the library downstairs. Without hesitation, she ran to the door and unlocked it. Swiftly, she ran down the stairs. Several candles had been lit in the entrance hall for the family's return. From halfway down the stairs, she could see the library door swinging back and forth from the force of what was now galelike winds. Moving quickly, she crossed the dark room and examined the large, French doors. One pane of glass had been splintered from its frame, and she reached out and pulled the doors shut, latching them firmly. She breathed a sigh of relief and was about to turn around when she felt another presence there. Fear clutched at her and she could feel her stomach tighten. Slowly, she turned and

faced the open door. Even with the light behind him, and not being able to see him, she recognized the figure and her body began to tremble. Her hands grew moist with fear as she clutched them together. She knew she stood in the direct patch of light from the door, and there was nowhere to go in this room. Resolutely, she straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. She was not prepared to fight him, but fight him she would.

"Mitchell, what are you doing here?" Her own voice sounded thin and shaky.

He did not answer but stood watching her. "Please!" she said softly, her voice now trembling with fear. "What do you want, Mitchell? Let me pass." Her voice cracked and she could not speak for a few minutes. Now the fear began to mount at his silence. She was afraid to move and afraid not to. She must get past him and reach the safety of her room where she could lock him out. She moved a few steps in his direction and, when she did, he stepped inside and closed the door behind him. The room was completely dark and the first pattering of rain and bright flashes of lightning heralded the coming of the storm. Then suddenly, he was beside her. He did not touch her but she felt the brush of his clothes as he stood near.

"Mitchell, for God's sake, stop this! You are frightening me. Please. . . ."

Mitchell had gone to the ball with his

parents in glum silence. Once there, he had begun to drink. With each glass of wine, the thought of her became more painful to him. After two hours, he had slipped out and gotten a horse from a surprised groom at the Prestons' stable. With each mile he drew nearer home, the desire for her grew until it was a white-hot blaze, consuming all his rational thoughts. Now he stood before her. He had stood in the doorway watching her turn and he knew she recognized him immediately.

She was wearing a loose gown and her hair fell about her in wild disarray from the wind. Her eyes had grown large and luminous at the sight of him, like twin pools of deep water. When he closed the door behind him, he closed out once and for all any thoughts he had of denying himself the goal he wanted.

Now he stood close to her and breathed the perfume she wore. Slowly, he lifted his hands and very gently touched the softness of her hair. Then he lifted her face in both his hands and brought his mouth down to hers and tasted gently the sweet moistness of the lips he was about to possess. He heard the soft, mewling sound she made as his mouth touched hers. Then he pulled her against him tightly. Now his mouth parted hers and his tongue explored. He could feel her trembling in his arms and the softness of her body against his only fanned his desire higher.

They were fighting a battle now as she

tried to keep her mouth firm and cold under his. But she was losing, and she felt her head begin to swim and the familiar heat filled her body with desire. Slowly, her lips softened and, with a hoarse sound of triumph, he absorbed her as she surrendered to him.

When he lifted his mouth from hers, he held her close to him. He could feel the soft curving of her body against him. Slowly, his hands caressed her and she leaned against him, weak and pliant.

Now again, he took her face in his hands, kissing her forehead, eyes, cheeks and lowering his mouth to the soft whiteness of her throat. With one hand, he loosened the tie of her robe and moved it slowly off her shoulders until it fell in a heap on the floor. He put his hands about her waist and brought her body close to him.

"Erin, I love you so, I want you so. For now, and for always," he said quietly. "I know you don't love me as you did Gregg. But he is gone. I cannot live so near you and not have you. It's like dying a little at a time. Let me try to make you love me. Give me a chance, Erin. Together, we can make a good life."

He waited for her answer without moving. In fact, it seemed to him he could not breathe. Then it came, softly, but firmly.

"Yes, Mitchell."

He gave a low, groaning sound, as though someone had lifted a great weight from him, and pulled her into his arms. This time, his

mouth possessed hers with all the heat of his passion and his hands moved slowly but surely over her body. Firm, knowing hands that sought to give as much pleasure as they received. They succeeded. Now she raised her arms about his neck and melted her body against his in an answering passion.

Without another word, he lifted her from the floor and held her against him as he walked to the door. She turned the knob and they left the library. Instead of taking her to her room, he took her to his. There, he lay her on the bed. Swiftly, he removed his clothes and lay down beside her. Now he caressed her at will, letting his hands and lips create a warm wave of pleasure that washed over her again and again until she cried out for him. Only then, when he had lifted her to a peak of desire that matched his, did he take her. Moving slowly but firmly, she grasped him with hands of desire and legs of velvet. He could feel the burning heat of her as she writhed beneath him, trying to hold him closer and closer. His heart sang out at the response of her body and they fused together, one in movement, one in desire. He raised himself above her and with swift, sure strokes, dove deeply into her, washing away all the past pain and making her one with him.

Now, he cradled her in his arms and caressed her hair with his fingers, twining them in her hair and holding her tightly.

"Erin," he whispered.

"Yes, Mitchell?" came the soft reply.

"I want you to have no regrets. I'll try to make life as happy for you as I possibly can. I swear to God I'll never do anything to make you unhappy. I want someday for you to love me as I love you."

"Mitchell. . . ."

"Shh," he said. "I know that now it's something a little less. But I'll settle for that. It's been almost eight months since. . . . I want you to marry me when the year is over. Will you?"

For a few minutes, she did not speak, and he felt a sudden tug of fear.

"Yes, Mitchell. I'll marry you when the year is over."

He pulled her tightly against him, and again his lips sought hers and the restless movements of his hands began again to lift them in the slow, spiral climb back up to the cliffs of passion from which they had just fallen.

Chapter 21

If Jenny or Thomas Cannon noticed Erin's white face and dark-shadowed eyes the next morning at breakfast, they said nothing about it.

Erin had risen from the bed when she was sure that Mitchell was sound asleep. Quietly, she had slipped out of his room and into her own. There, she donned a nightgown and was about to get into bed when she remembered the robe on the floor in the library. Quickly,

she ran down the steps and retrieved it. She had just returned to her room when she heard the sound of an approaching carriage. Blowing out her candle, she jumped into bed and pretended to be asleep when the knock sounded on her door. She lay very still and waited, but the knock sounded again, followed by Jenny's voice gently calling her name.

"Erin? Erin?"

"Yes," she answered in what she tried to make sound like a sleep-filled voice.

Jenny opened the door and came in. "Are you all right, Erin? The storm was very bad. We've been hours trying to get home."

"Oh, I'm fine, thank you."

"Erin. . . ." Jenny hesitated.

"What?"

"Mitchell disappeared from the party early. I was wondering if . . . ?"

"Oh, yes. He came home early. I heard him. I imagine he's in bed now. I think he'd been drinking a little."

Jenny searched her face closely and Erin tried to keep it as clear as she could. She wanted time—time to talk to Mitchell about what had happened, and even more time to search her own mind and heart for the right thing to do.

At last, Jenny seemed to be reassured and she smiled down at Erin. "Go back to sleep, child. I'll see you at breakfast. Good night, Erin."

"Good night, Mama Cannon," she replied.

When the door closed behind Jenny, Erin sighed deeply in relief. Then she lay back on her pillow and searched within herself for the answers to her questions. It was hours before she finally closed her eyes in sleep.

She ate a small amount of breakfast but was away from the table and gone before Mitchell came downstairs.

"Where is Erin?" he asked.

"She's gone riding; over to Diane's possibly," answered his mother, watching him closely. "You left the party rather early, didn't you? Diane was asking for you."

"Yes, I'm afraid I had a little too much to drink," he laughed.

"Mitch. . . ."

"Mother, listen closely to me. It's been eight months since the *Amy C.* went down. No matter where in the world Gregg would be, he could have gotten home by now."

"If he were hurt. . . ." she began.

"If he were hurt, he could have sent word. You know that's true, mother. How many shipwrecks have you lived through? Any survivors make it back here within weeks? No, it pains me as much as you, but the *Amy C.* is gone and Gregg is gone. I will not let Erin be a sacrifice on the altar of Gregg's memory. It isn't fair to her or to me. I love her very much, mother. I know she doesn't love me as she did Gregg. But I'm going to try to make her happy. Don't spoil it, please," he

added softly.

For a long while, Jenny studied her son's face. There was strength there and she knew that was what Erin needed. Slowly, she nodded her head and tears formed in her eyes as she accepted, for possibly the first time, that Gregg was really gone. Mitch came around the side of the table and knelt in front of her. Taking both her hands in his, he smiled at her.

"I love you, mother. Let's try to put our memories where they belong. Let's try to put the pieces of our lives back together and be happy again."

She looked deeply into the eyes of her older son and knew he spoke the truth. She had to realize that they must pick up the threads of their lives again and go on. She raised her eyes over his head and looked at her husband. His face held sympathy for her pain but he gave an affirmative nod of his head. He understood her feelings as he had always understood her.

"Give me your blessing, mother, and your approval. It is very important to me if I'm to finally convince Erin to marry me."

Jenny sighed heavily and, with tear-misted eyes, kissed Mitchell's forehead. "You have my blessing, son. I only hope you are both sure and know what you are doing."

"I know what I'm doing, mother." He laughed happily for the first time in weeks. "Now all I have to do is convince Erin that my

way is the right one. I'd like to be married as soon as the year is over: that's four months. Do you think you can handle it, mother?"

"You just talk to Erin. Let me handle all the arrangements. As soon as she comes and tells me, I'll begin."

"What you're saying is I'd better be about the business of convincing her. Well, where has she gone?"

"She was dressed for riding but she didn't say where," said Thomas.

"I'll bet I know." He bent to kiss his mother again and left the room. His light whistle could be heard retreating in the direction of the stable.

Jenny and Thomas sat looking at each other in silence.

"You still have misgivings, Jen?"

"Thomas, when did you ever have to convince me to love you? When did Gregg have to convince Erin? If Erin really loved him, she would need no convincing. I'm afraid, Thomas," she added quietly.

Mitchell whistled all the way to the stable and waited with some impatience while his horse was saddled. He rode slowly but surely along a quite familiar path. When his horse came into the clearing by the river, he saw her horse already tied there. At first, he didn't see her; then he spotted her walking along the riverbank. He dismounted and walked to the tree and, standing in the

shade, watched her for a few minutes unobserved. Slowly, she made her way toward him still not aware of his presence. She walked slowly and her eyes were on the ground. She was unaware of the beauty of her surroundings. She was almost upon him when she looked up, startled at his presence.

"Oh, Mitchell, I didn't hear you come."

"Your mind was elsewhere," he said.

Her cheeks flushed a little and her eyes deepened to a dark-shadowed green. He moved down beside her and gently lifted her chin with his fingers and looked deeply into her eyes.

"I thought we had put all misgivings behind us last night."

"Mitchell . . . what if . . . what if he . . ."
She looked up at him, unable to finish.

He grasped her roughly by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake, then he pulled her against him and rocked her in his arms.

"Erin, Erin, stop it. Let the past go. Look at what the future has to offer you. I've waited all these months just to be sure that was not what was going to happen. There is no use in looking back. Look toward tomorrow and all the tomorrows to follow. I love you, Erin, and I'll do everything in my power to make your life happy from now on."

He lifted her face with his hands and brushed her lips gently with his. Then he held her again with her head against his chest.

"You said last night that you would marry me when the year was over. Did you mean it, Erin?"

"Yes," came the whispered reply.

"Then from today on, we look only forward. Mother said that when you tell her the date you want, she'll begin making arrangements. It's August now. How about a Christmas wedding? Then we'll go away for awhile. The *Golden Eagle* is a beautiful place for a honeymoon."

"No! No, Mitchell. We'll go somewhere else. I'd rather not have my honeymoon on board a ship."

He could have bitten his tongue when he realized what he had said. "Damn!" he thought. "That was really a stupid move, Mitch Cannon. Of course, she spent her honeymoon with Gregg on the *Amy C.*"

"Well, we don't have to decide that now, anyway. It's enough for me just to hear you say you'll marry me. Come, let's go back and tell my parents." He slipped his arm about her waist and they walked slowly toward the horses.

She was silent on the ride home and he did not interrupt her thoughts, for he was formulating some definite plans of his own.

They saw to their horses, then walked together to the house. They were just inside the door when a short cry of anguish came from the library, along with a roar of anger from Thomas Cannon. For a minute, Mitch

and Erin looked at one another in alarm. Then they both ran to the library door and pushed it open. Jenny Cannon stood by the desk, her face ashen and trembling hands clutched together. Thomas sat at the desk holding a paper in his hands.

"Father, what's the matter?" asked Mitch sharply.

Erin ran to Jenny and put her arm about her shoulder to comfort her.

Thomas Cannon's face had become red with anger. "That bastard," he muttered. "He won't even have the decency to see me himself."

"What is it?" asked Mitch.

"The bank is recalling all our notes at one time, effective immediately."

"All. . . ." gasped Mitchell. "My God! That would leave us bankrupt after the loss of the *Amy C.* They surely can't mean all."

"All, Mitchell," said Thomas firmly and coldly. His eyes were narrowed to icy blue slits. "There's something wrong here, and I don't know what it is. They have no way of realizing any money by doing this. For some reason, I feel there's more to this than we understand."

"What could it be, Thomas?" asked Jenny, her voice deep with worry.

"I don't know. I just can't understand the reasoning behind it. Brian Turnbull would never have let this happen if he could have prevented it. He knows that with the profit

from *The Godolphin* and what the *Golden Eagle* is carrying this time, we would have more than enough to cover all our notes and a tidy profit to boot. It's as though the bank is trying to press us before we have a chance to recoup."

"What are we going to do, father? Would you like me to ride in and talk to him? Maybe I can convince him to give us the time we need."

"That's a good idea, son," said Thomas. "Only we'll ride in together tomorrow. I want to see his face when we talk."

"Thomas, you won't do anything foolish, will you?" Jenny questioned, her worried frown deepening as she looked closely at her husband.

"No, Jen. I just want to find out why a man who doesn't even know me is deliberately trying to break me."

Erin had watched the three as they talked together. "They are like one in time of trouble," she thought. "If there were only something I could do to help them." She thought back over the time she had spent with the Cannons and the warm and loving way they had accepted her as a daughter when Gregg had first brought her home. She had spent many happy hours in this house in the past fourteen months. Even now, after their own loss, they were giving her all their care. And Mitchell, dear Mitchell, trying to help her right herself and find some kind of

happiness. She kept hearing Thomas referring to "him." Now she realized it could not be the very kind gentleman who had welcomed her at the bank that day but a stranger who had entered all their lives, bent on destroying the Cannons, one and all.

"This man—what is he and who is he?" she questioned.

"He's the major stockholder in the bank now and, as such, holds the power of life and death over us all. He hasn't been there very long but in the short time he has been, he's made his power felt. His name is Duggan, Charles Duggan."

Chapter 22

Erin felt as though she had been struck a violent blow. Suddenly she could not breathe and a huge knot of pain seemed centered in her stomach. She had been standing near the door watching the three in conversation about the desk. The words of their conversation faded away and into her mind came the image of Charles Duggan as she had last seen him, bending her back over the table in her parents' cottage, his face filled with lust. It

seemed to her that each time she had reached for any kind of happiness it had been wrenched brutally away from her. Now this specter from the past was here again to destroy her life.

Slowly, she turned away and without a sound left the room and climbed the stairs to her room. She closed the door after her and paced the floor. What could she do? How could she help the Cannons who had given her so much? Confused thoughts tumbled about in her head. There must be a way to reach this man, make him understand what he was doing. A small plan began rationalizing itself in her head when there was a knock on the door.

"Erin, Erin, are you there?" It was Jenny Cannon's voice. Erin knew she must not tell Jenny the plans she was making. They had never told Gregg's parents the name of the man who had caused so much grief to Erin before she and Gregg were married. There was no way of connecting the perpetrator of this disaster to them and the cause of Erin's presence here. She determined that no one would know until she had a chance to try to carry out her plans. She walked slowly to the door and opened it, admitting Jenny.

"What happened, Erin? Why did you disappear like that?"

"You all looked so miserable, I felt I was intruding on something very personal to the family," she said.

Jenny smiled and embraced her. "You are also family, Erin. I hear that you and Mitchell are contemplating marriage?"

"Do you think I'm wrong, Mama Cannon? Do you think I should not marry again? Would it be disrespectful to Gregg's memory? I would never do anything you or Papa Cannon thought was not the right thing."

"Erin, I've had a long talk with Mitchell. He loves you very deeply, more deeply than even I thought." She sighed. "I imagine he is right about putting our memories where they belong, in the past, and going on to the future." She reached out and touched Erin lightly on the arm. There was deep sympathy in her eyes. "I also know that you do not love him as you did Gregg."

Erin gave a start and tried to interrupt.

"No, wait, Erin, let me finish. The first love in a girl's life is something she will never forget. But one day the girl becomes a woman, and she realizes that life does not always treat us as we desire. Sometimes it becomes necessary to make bargains with life. If it takes away one thing, it sometimes gives something in its place. Do you understand?"

"Yes, I do understand, and I do love you. You are so like my own mother."

"Thank you, child. Now come downstairs and join us for tea and some lunch. Mitchell is impatient to come and see what's wrong and I don't think that would be wise, do you?" She

laughed and Erin joined her for a moment.

She kept her thoughts about Charles Duggan to herself when she saw Mitchell's eyes—deep, gray-blue with worry—turn toward her.

"Erin, are you all right? What happened?"

"I'm fine, Mitch. I just felt I was intruding. I thought it best if I left you all alone for awhile to discuss this . . . problem."

"Yes, Mitchell, what are we going to do?" asked Jenny.

"Father and I are going to speak to Charles Duggan at the beginning of the week. Maybe we can persuade him to wait for at least two months. By that time, we'll be prepared to meet his notes."

Erin felt again, as she had at times before, the cold fingers of apprehension run up her spine. Why was Charles really doing this? What did he want? He did not even know the Cannons with the exception of Gregg. Would a man carry that kind of hate so deeply as to try and destroy a whole family for one small incident such as that? She thought back over what she knew of Charles, and then she realized that it was a possibility. She also realized she must do something, and soon!

Her reverie was interrupted by Mitchell putting his arm about her waist. She looked at Mr. and Mrs. Cannon with surprised eyes until she realized that while she was day-dreaming, Mitchell had been talking to them about their plans. It was at that precise

minute that things began to crystallize in her mind. She knew what Charles wanted just as she knew he must know Gregg was dead and she was free. Making her decision quickly, she turned to the Cannons and smiled up at them. Then she looked at Mitchell. "We needn't wait, Mitch. I'm willing to marry you as soon as you want me to," she said quietly.

For a few minutes he looked at her, and the words she had spoken did not seem to register in his mind. Then his eyes glowed happily and a bright smile lighted his face. He kissed her cheek quickly.

"Thank you, Erin. You've made me very happy. Now it's my turn to try to make up for all the grief you've had." He lowered his voice. "I love you, Erin. I'll do everything in my power to see that you never regret your decision."

She smiled at him and pushed to the back of her mind the emotions she really felt at the moment. She had to be alone for awhile to formulate her plans. Some way she was going to convince Charles Duggan that she was not free, and any plans he had concerning her could come to no avail. He had to be convinced that revenge against the Cannons was useless, since Gregg was dead and the others were not responsible for what had happened between them.

Was it wrong to want to marry Mitchell to protect him and his parents from this disaster? She knew that she did not love him

as she loved Gregg, but Jenny's words came back to her. "Sometimes we have to make bargains with life. When it takes something away, it often gives us something in return." It had taken Gregg away from her so brutally and so soon. Maybe she could not find the same blazing passion in Mitchell's arms but she could find peace of mind and a way out of this trouble for all the Cannons. She would try with her whole heart to make Mitchell a good wife.

As soon as she possibly could, she escaped Mitchell's arms and went to her room. There she sat for a long time on the edge of the bed trying to put together a plan of action. When she had solidified her plans in her mind, she rang for Polly.

"Yes, ma'am?" Polly questioned when she arrived.

"Tell the Cannons I won't be down for dinner and bring me a tray here in my room. Then send for young Mikel. I want him to deliver a note for me. And Polly . . . ?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"I don't want anyone but us to know I'm having this note delivered or to whom it is going. Can you make that very clear to Mikel?"

"If he opens his mouth to anyone, ma'am, I'll box his ears good and he knows it. I'll send him right up and I'll bring you a tray myself."

"Thank you, Polly. I'm very grateful for all

your kindness."

"It's a pleasure, Miz Erin." She smiled and slipped out of the room quickly.

Erin sat down at the desk and pulled a piece of paper toward her. Picking up a pen, she sat quietly for a few minutes thinking before she began to write. She had just finished when a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in."

Young Mikel opened the door for a tray-laden Polly.

"I told the Cannons what you said, Miz Erin," she giggled. "Mr. Mitchell was real disappointed but he said he'd see you in the morning."

Erin turned to Mikel and handed him the folded piece of paper. Mikel was Polly's younger brother and worked as a stableboy for the Cannons. He was fourteen and stood in wide-eyed wonder at the fact that Miss Erin wanted to talk to him. Since her arrival, he had been saddling her horse in the mornings for her. His young heart had been so captivated by Erin that he would have gladly walked across hot coals in his bare feet if he thought she would have smiled at him. He stood now, his face flushing a bright pink, as she came close to him.

"You must not let anyone know you've delivered this for me, Mikel. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am," he stammered, his eyes glued on Erin. "I'll never say a word, Miss

Erin, I swear to God."

"Can you slip away and be back before anyone misses you?"

Now he grinned widely. "Oh, yes, ma'am. No one will ever know I've been gone. Do I wait for an answer, Miz Erin, or do I just deliver it and come back?"

"There's no necessity to wait for an answer, Mikel. I'm not asking a question in the note. I'm just stating my intentions."

Although he did not understand what she was talking about, he was content to know he was doing something for her. He took the note from her extended hand and tucked it inside his shirt. Then he turned and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Erin turned away from the door and sat down to eat. She had very little appetite and pushed her food about on her plate, while Polly puttered about the room watching her from the corners of her eyes.

Erin rose and paced slowly about the room trying to put her plans together. She must create just the right impression and say just the right thing or it would be a failure. She felt that she could make Charles understand that there was nothing to be gained from harassing the Cannons. That she was no longer a free woman but promised to Mitchell Cannon. She felt a little more confidence as she rehearsed again and again the exact words she was going to say. After awhile, she began to realize that Polly had

been watching her for quite some time. Now she turned to face her.

"Miz Erin, is something wrong?" she asked. "Can I do anything to help you?"

"No, Polly. Everything is just fine. I do need some help from you. First thing in the morning, I want you to prepare my black velvet riding habit. Then I have a very special way I want you to do my hair. I want to create a certain impression and I need your help."

"Can't you tell me what's wrong? Maybe I can do something to help."

"Just do what I ask, Polly," she said gently. "That's all the help I need at the moment. But believe me, if I have any problems or need any help, I'll ask. I know you're a friend, Polly, but I've got to do this myself. I'm sorry."

"But if you need me, you'll let me know?"

Erin smiled at her. "Yes, Polly. Now good night. Remember, I'll see you first thing in the morning . . . early!"

"Yes, ma'am. Good night."

"Good night, Polly."

As Erin dressed for bed, she prayed silently that what she was about to do would work. She blew out her candle, but it was a long time before she could sleep.

She was awake and up before dawn, waiting patiently for Polly. It was not long before a timid knock sounded on the door. She smiled to herself.

"Come in, Polly," she said in a whisper.

With Polly's help, Erin dressed in the riding habit then sat before her mirror, as Polly followed her instructions with her hair. The unanswered questions were still in Polly's eyes but she said nothing. When she finished, Erin stood in front of the full mirror. The reflection she saw pleased her.

"You've done a wonderful job with what you have to work with, Polly," she chuckled.

"M . . . Miz Erin, you look so. . . ."

"So what, Polly?"

"So . . . cold."

"Good. That's exactly what I had in mind. Have you sent for my horse?"

"Yes, ma'am. Mikel will have it out front by now."

She watched with a deeply worried expression while Erin turned away from the mirror and without another word left the room.

She moved quietly down the stairs and to the front door. Mikel stood outside with her horse, waiting. He helped her mount and watched as she moved the horse expertly down the long drive toward town.

She paced herself so that she arrived at the bank at exactly the time her note had said she would. She dismounted and walked to the front door. Although it was too early, she found it unlocked and smiled to herself. She moved across the dark lobby to the office door. A crack under the door reflected the

light inside. Without knocking, she opened the door and stepped inside, closing it quickly after her. He stood at the window and she knew he had seen her arrive. Slowly, he turned and faced her. He smiled slightly.

"Hello, Erin. I've waited a long time for this moment."

Chapter 23

They stood for a few minutes studying one another. The steady ticking of the clock could be heard in the heavy silence of the room. "He has changed," she thought. His eyes were cool as he studied her and his mouth was drawn in a tight line. There was a scar from the temple on his right side that ran down his face to the corner of his jaw line. She looked into his eyes and the first cold, warning chill came to her. Straightening her shoulders,

she lifted her chin and returned his look as coldly as she could.

"It's been a long time, Erin," he said softly. "I've heard of your loss. I'm sorry."

"Are you really, Charles?"

"Well," he laughed shortly, "no, not really. I'm only sorry I did not have the pleasure of doing it myself."

Her eyes glowed with anger, the very emotion she had promised herself she would control.

"What are you trying to do, Charles? What could you possibly hope to gain? Gregg is dead. The others have done nothing to warrant what you're doing to them."

"Oh, I've done nothing to harm the Cannons . . . yet. Just a few little incidents to get your attention."

"My attention!" Again, she had to pull herself up short to control her fury. She wanted so desperately to strike him again and again.

He chuckled as he saw her anger blaze in her eyes. She clenched her fists at her side and gripped herself mentally, giving her emotions a shaking.

"Let's come to the point, Charles. What are you doing here and what do you really want?"

"Now, Erin, really," he laughed. "Won't you sit down? I'm sure we can discuss my terms. . . ."

"Terms! For what? This is no surrender, Charles. If you think it is, you are sadly

mistaken. I came to tell you to leave the Cannons alone or. . . .”

“Or what? Will your husband call me out? Oh, that’s right. You’re a widow now.”

“Not for very much longer,” she replied, watching his face for a reaction. She was not disappointed. His face flushed angrily before he could bring it under control.

“What do you mean, not for very much longer?” he asked.

“I’m to marry Mitchell Cannon next month.”

His hands tightened on the back of the chair until the knuckles turned white. The gaze he turned on her was so full of fury that she gasped and took a step back away from him. Slowly, with massive effort on his part, he got himself under control. Again, the cold, throaty chuckle, and his eyes glowed with amusement. “I think not, Erin.”

“But I will, within the next month, and there’s nothing you can do about it. I am no longer a free woman. There could be nothing between us, Charles. Leave the Cannons alone.”

“Again you are wrong, my dear,” he said softly. “You will not marry Mitchell Cannon, and there are many things I can do to them. If you will sit down for a few minutes, I’ll show you some papers I have. After you’ve read them, you will change your mind, I’m sure.”

She moved slowly across the room to the chair opposite his desk. After she had seated

herself, he lowered himself to his seat. She kept her eyes on his; she dare not falter. He must not for a moment sense the rising panic in her. In front of him, he had a small stack of papers. Over these, he folded his hands. After glancing at them for a moment, she looked up again into his eyes. There she saw again the cold glitter of amusement.

"He's playing with me," she thought. "What kind of knowledge does he have of those papers that could harm the Cannons?"

"What do you want me to read, Charles? Whatever it is, it will make no difference to me. The Cannons are a wonderful family. There is nothing they could have done that you could use."

"No?" he questioned softly. "Then I suggest you sit back and get comfortable and read these." With that, he pushed the papers slowly across the desk toward her. For a few minutes, she sat and looked at the papers on the desk in front of her. He tented his fingers together in front of him and tapped them gently against his pursed lips as he watched her through hooded eyes.

Something held her back from reaching for the papers. She felt a moment of severe panic as she realized she was afraid to see what was written on them. Her eyes rose to meet his again. For a long time, they looked at each other, his will battling furiously with hers. She could feel tiny beads of perspiration break out on her forehead. She did not

know that he saw them, too, and recognized the trembling in her hands for what it was. Inwardly, he chuckled to himself. This time he held all the cards and there was no way for her to escape. What he wanted was now firmly in his hands and he was not about to let it get away again.

She knew that she must either reach for the papers and read them or get up and run. If there was anything there to harm the Cannons, she must know. Slowly, she reached out one trembling hand and lifted the papers from the desk. He smiled slightly but did not say anything. She drew the papers to her and began to read.

The time ticked by slowly as he watched her read the evidence he had put before her. Minute by minute, he watched her face whiten as she read on and on. Her lips were pulled taut to keep them from trembling. Suddenly, she threw the papers on the desk and rose to her feet.

"Those are lies, all lies. Thomas Cannon is not that kind of man. He could not do any of the things that are printed there."

"I have proof that everything on those papers is true, Erin," he said quietly. "Written proof and eyewitnesses who are quite willing to testify in a court of law."

"Why, Charles? Why destroy the Cannons? They've done nothing to you. They don't even know of the connection between you and me."

She stopped talking suddenly as she real-

ized she had volunteered too much information. She caught the ghost of the smile in his eyes as he realized the same thing.

"Then it should make everything work out fine. If they don't know about me, they'll make no connection between us when you decide to leave."

"I've no intention of leaving the Cannon house, and I'm going to marry Mitchell Cannon within the month," she said firmly, more firmly than she felt for her stomach had tightened at his words and she felt slightly light-headed.

"What must I do to prove to you, Erin," he said, "that I mean what I say? You will either concede to my terms or your Cannons will suffer the consequences. I imagine Thomas Cannon would hang without a whimper, but I do think the effect would be different on his wife and son."

"Leave me alone, Charles," she said in a soft, choked whisper. "Go away and leave me alone."

He knew she was defeated just as she also knew it. Slowly, she sank back down in her chair, her eyes wide and moisture-filled.

"No, Erin, my love. You seem to need proof that I mean what I say. I'm going to provide it for you. Tonight at dinner, Thomas Cannon will receive an anonymous note. Watch him closely and you will have all the proof you need."

He had moved around the desk and stood

beside her when he stopped talking. She looked up at him.

"I shall hate you, Charles. No matter what else happens."

"Hate and love are only two sides of the same coin, Erin. You have one, I have the other."

"How can you call that love?"

"You never gave me the chance to prove my love for you, Erin. Now I intend to take it. After you have your proof, we will meet again. Then you will be more acceptable to my . . . arrangement, I'm sure."

He reached down and took her hands, pulling her to her feet. They stood inches apart and she could no longer control the trembling of her body or the tears in her eyes. He took her by the shoulders and drew her against him. Holding her eyes with his, she felt frozen, unable to move. Slowly, he tipped her chin up and lowered his mouth to hers, tasting the sweet softness of her lips gently. Then, just as gently, he moved away from her and opened the door.

"I'll expect another note from you after you've had your proof," he said quietly.

Wordlessly, she moved toward the door. For a minute, she stood beside him and looked up at him. He smiled at her and she could see the glow of success in his eyes. Suddenly all the pent-up rage she felt flooded to the surface. She raised her hand and struck him with all her strength. The sound

of the blow echoed through the silent room. He grasped her by the shoulders and jerked her almost off her feet against him. Now his mouth closed on hers with a hungry violence. She felt bruised and shaken as he parted her lips with his and held her immobile against him for what seemed an eternity. When he released her finally, she sobbed as he thrust her back against the door frame.

"Don't ever do that again, my love. I might not let you off so easy next time."

She could hear his chuckle follow her as she stumbled across the lobby of the bank and out the door. Mounting her horse, she headed him toward home before she gave in to the tears of frustration and anger.

By the time she reached home, she had herself under control. It was a good thing that she did for when she rode up, Mitchell was waiting for her on the front steps.

"Erin," he said as he moved to the side of the horse and lifted his arms to help her down. "Why didn't you wait for me?"

"I just wanted to be alone for awhile, Mitch. I'm sorry if I upset you."

She put both hands on his shoulders and he lifted her from the saddle and stood her on her feet, but he did not release her. Instead, he put his arms tightly about her and looked deeply into her eyes.

"I don't know what made you change your mind about marrying me, Erin, but I want you to know how happy it's made me."

He held her against him tightly and kissed her forehead and cheeks, then captured her lips with his in a gentle, undemanding kiss. "I love you, Erin," he spoke softly against her hair as he held her. She could feel the tightening in her throat and could not speak. Slowly, hot tears slipped from her closed eyes and she put her arms about him and held onto him tightly. He must have sensed her emotions for he looked down at her.

"Don't cry, Erin. From now on, I'm going to see that you never have another cause for tears," he said gently as he brushed the tears away from her cheeks.

"Oh, Mitchell, you are such a good man."

"Well, I give dubious thanks for that," he laughed. "Shall we go in and have some lunch?" If he noticed that she had made no profession of love, he kept it well to himself.

He linked her arm in his and they went into the house. She tried her best to smile and be happy during lunch but the time seemed to drag. Mitchell watched her with curious eyes when she wasn't looking. Something was changed and he didn't know just what, but it caused a flutter of apprehension in him.

When lunch was over, Erin excused herself to change clothes. Once in her room, she threw herself on the bed and released all the tears she had held back. She stayed in her room most of the afternoon trying to gather her thoughts together and make some plans. Surely the things she had read on those

papers had to be lies, but could she afford to call his bluff? Could she afford the possibility of them being true and the effect they would have on Jenny Cannon, who had been more than a mother to her? She was going to watch very closely tonight at dinner to see the effect Charles' note would have.

If the note did not upset Thomas Cannon as she thought, she would resist Charles' efforts at blackmail and go ahead with her plans to marry Mitchell. She put from her mind any plans of what she would do if the note proved Charles right. "It couldn't!" she thought wildly. Mitchell's father was a good man. Surely he could not have done what those papers accused him of. With determination, she put the thoughts from her mind and rang for Polly to bring water for her bath.

After she had bathed and Polly had coiled her long hair atop her head, she dressed in a plain, green, muslin dress and went downstairs to join Jenny in arranging the table for dinner. She moved about the house silently, her mind continually darting back against her will to the information Charles had made her read.

"Jenny?"

"Yes, Erin?"

"Did Papa Cannon have the shipping line when you married him?"

"Yes, Erin. He had two ships and was in the process of acquiring another when we met."

"How did he get his first ship?"

Jenny stopped what she was doing and looked closely at Erin. "I really don't know, Erin. It seems to me he always had it. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. I was just curious."

A quiet, gnawing fear clutched her stomach and a feeling of impending disaster held her firmly in its grasp. She was going to ask more questions when Mitchell and his father came into the room.

They sat down to dinner and Erin felt as though swallowing one bite of food would be impossible. She clutched her hands together tightly on her lap when the butler brought the note to Thomas Cannon. Her eyes were frozen on his face as he opened it. If she had any doubts about the truth of Charles accusations, they were gone as she watched his reaction.

His face turned deathly white and he crumpled the note in his hand, thrusting it deeply in his pocket. She felt as though her world had suddenly ended for she knew now she had no choice but to give in to Charles terms.

Chapter 24

Several days passed but Erin still could not bring herself to send another note to Charles. She could not give in that easily. "What if Mitchell and I ran away and left his father a warning note," she thought. Then she dismissed the idea as fast as it came. It would mean explaining everything to Mitchell and she knew he would never leave his parents if they were in trouble. She also knew she could not hurt Jenny that way.

"There must be a way out," she thought but, deep in her mind, she knew the only thing she had left to do. And then, unbidden, came the terrible thought, "What if Charles was dead?" She pushed it from her thoughts but it returned again and again. Her mind even began making up ways to do it before the horror of the idea really struck her.

She and Mitchell had just come back from an early afternoon ride when they saw the horse tied in front of the house. They had not reached it yet before a young man came out, mounted and rode away.

"I wonder who that was?" said Mitch, thoughtfully.

"I'm sure that's the young man who's been visiting Polly, but this is not her day out. I wonder why he came today," she answered.

They left their horses at the stable and went into the house. When they questioned Jenny about the visitor, she laughed.

"Polly's gentleman friend just wanted to see her for a moment. They talked for awhile, then he left."

"Where's Polly now?" questioned Erin.

"Upstairs laying out your dress, my dear. We're having guests for dinner."

"Wonderful, who's coming?"

"Thomas has invited some of the gentlemen from the bank. He's trying to get this mess about the recall of our notes straightened out."

Erin's heart thudded violently. "Who has

he invited?"

"Mr. Turnbull, for one, and the new stockholder, Mr. Duggan. It seems he's the final word on this matter."

"Is it important that I be here?" Erin said softly. "I have a bit of a headache."

"Maybe if you lie down awhile before dinner, Erin, it will go away. I'm sure Thomas wants your pretty face at dinner to help the situation and Mitchell will be like an angry bull if he has to have another evening without you," laughed Jenny.

Mitchell laughingly agreed. Erin had no excuse and no way out. She knew why Charles had agreed to come. She must either capitulate tonight or he would bring out the papers and totally destroy the Cannon family. She knew, without a doubt, what her answer would be.

Slowly, she went upstairs to her room. When she opened the door, Polly was arranging the folds of her best dress across the bed. She turned at Erin's entrance.

"Oh, Miz Erin. I've a note for you. My gentleman friend brought it this afternoon." She handed the small white envelope to Erin who took it silently and broke the seal and read: "The time for waiting is past. I must have your answer tonight. I am bringing with me all the evidence I have. Make your decision wisely, Erin. C.D."

Slowly, she crumpled the paper in her hand. There was no way out now. He knew as

well as she what her answer would be.

Polly helped her dress that evening and watched silently as a white-faced Erin sat quietly while she arranged her hair. Polly knew that there was something dreadfully wrong, but there was no way she could help Erin. She watched her slowly leave the room as though she moved automatically and all the life within her was gone. She shook her head in sympathy, then sighed deeply and went on about her duties.

As Erin came down the stairs, she could hear the murmur of voices. She stopped for a moment on the stairs. She couldn't face him—she couldn't. She was about to turn and run back to her room—and damn the consequences—when a voice broke into her thoughts.

"Erin," said Mitchell, "I was about to come up after you. We've been waiting for you." He had reached her side and dropped his arm about her waist. "You look lovely, Erin. You'd melt the heart of any banker," he laughed.

Together, they went into the study where Jenny and the men sat talking. Charles turned from Mr. Turnbull at their entrance and watched her walk toward him. She knew by the glowing look of triumph in his eyes that he was sure of her.

He smiled and wished her a good-evening when they were introduced but his hand was firm and his eyes never left hers. She sat

opposite him on the couch and Mitchell sat beside her. Although she tried to avoid it, her eyes kept returning to his. She knew that the Cannons were trying in every way to impress him. She felt his amusement with their efforts.

"Mrs. Cannon," he said, smiling at Jenny. "I'm told you have some of the loveliest roses in the county."

"Thank you, Mr. Duggan. I'm quite proud of my garden, I'm afraid," she said.

He turned to Erin. "Maybe I could persuade your lovely daughter-in-law to give me a small tour of the garden before dinner."

Erin felt trapped. There was no way she could refuse without alarming the Cannons. She rose slowly from her seat and put her hand through the arm he offered. Together they went out through the wide French doors and into the dark garden.

They walked together for a few minutes without words. Twice she tried to pull her arm away but he held it firmly. Then when they had reached the far corner of the garden, he spotted the gazebo that was placed there. With a firm hand, he drew her inside before he released her.

"Well, Erin, I've come for your decision. I'm sure you saw the results of my note?" She nodded her head silently. "I've come prepared for any decision you might make," he said softly.

"You know the only decision I can make,"

she said vehemently. "Charles, please reconsider. You know I do not love you. Please!"

He moved away from her but watched her steadily. "Erin, I want you under any terms I can get you. I have always wanted you since you were sixteen. You'll find that I have a way of getting what I want. I take it you understand now that I will not hesitate to use the information I have?"

She nodded her head again. "Tell me what you want me to do," she said softly.

"There is a ship leaving port next week, on Thursday about midnight. I have already booked passage for two."

"You were so sure of yourself?"

"No, I was sure of you. I knew you could not sacrifice the Cannons. I'm not as squeamish as you. What I want, I take, one way or another."

"One thing, Charles."

"Yes?"

"The papers you have; I want them before we sail."

"You really don't think I'd give them to you now, Erin?" he laughed. "You may bring a messenger with you to the dock. Just before we sail, I'll give you the papers and you can send them and any other messages you care to. I don't intend to keep open my methods of gathering information. If you ever decide to change your mind and leave me, rest assured I'll see to it that the price is paid."

"Damn you!" she said fiercely, glaring at

him. She moved to pass him and return to the house. He put an arm out to stop her. "We have yet to seal our bargain, Erin," he said softly. "I want a warm woman, not a cold, stone statue. Do you understand? We are going to spend the rest of our lives together, you and I. For now, one willing kiss will do." His arms closed about her, holding her firmly against him. He smiled down into her upturned face. "Many things rest on your performance, Erin. I want a sample of what I'm getting."

He lowered his head and caught her lips with his, gently but firmly. At first, her lips were cold and she could not bring herself to respond to him.

He looked at her for a moment. "If that's the best I can expect, I suggest we go back in and bring this to an end now." He turned away from her.

"No! Charles, wait . . . please . . . I . . . I'll. . ."

Again, he pulled her against him, letting his hands move slowly down over her shoulders, holding her gently by the waist but not with any force. "You'll have to prove it now."

She raised her arms and put them about his neck and moved herself tightly against him, pulling his head down to her. She met his mouth with her parted lips, kissing him with all the warmth and giving she could manage. She felt his arms tighten about her. Slowly, his tongue explored the soft, inner

flesh of her lips and hers met it with the same pressure. Against her will, she could feel it awaken long dormant feelings of passion in her disobedient body.

When he finally released her after what felt like an eternity, he looked at her again with the blazing glow of passion in his eyes. "I will find it very difficult to wait another week to possess you, my love," he said in a deep, husky voice. Then he took her by the elbow and guided her back to the house.

She did not really know how she made it through the rest of the evening. She felt Mitchell's eyes on her, filled with question. Trying her best to avoid his steady gaze, she excused herself just before their guests left and almost ran up the stairs to her room. After she had prepared herself for bed, she was sitting in front of her dressing table brushing her hair when a light knock came on the door. She rose and went to the door, opening it to find Mitchell there.

"Mitch," she whispered. "It's very late."

"I have to talk to you, Erin. It's important. Let me come in for just a minute."

The intent look on his face filled her with fear of the questions he might ask that she could not answer.

He stepped inside and closed the door behind him. For a few seconds, he looked at her. Then he reached out his arms and pulled her into them gently. He held her against him without any demands, and slowly she

felt the tension unwinding. "If only I could stay safe in his arms forever," she thought. He moved away slightly from her and looked down into her eyes.

"What's wrong, Erin? Something's been on your mind for the last few days. Tonight you were very unhappy about something. If there's anything I can do to help ease your problems, let me know."

The gentleness with which he spoke brought tears to her eyes. How could she ever tell him? How could she say that by this time next week, she would be on a ship, sailing away from the only happiness she had known, into a life with a man she hated? No! There was no way to tell him that would not create a problem worse than the one they already had. Instead of trying to say anything, she moved against him and, placing her hands on the back of his head, drew it down to hers in a kiss that sent his senses reeling.

"Christ, Erin," he said in a voice breaking with passion. He lifted her from her feet with arms like steel bands and held her tight as he let his lips move down her throat to the opening of her robe. Swinging her up in his arms, he moved toward the bed. Once there, he removed the robe she wore and the flimsy nightgown that stood between them. Then his own clothes followed and, in a few minutes, he was beside her on the bed, whispering her name softly and drawing her

to him.

She matched his passion now in a way he had never dreamed possible. All other thoughts and questions left his mind and he was filled with the magic of his love for Erin.

Afterward, she lay curled against him, his arms circling her, and he held her gently as she slept. Somehow, sleep would not come for him. He lay awake now pondering the unanswered questions he had come to Erin with. At the onset of the dinner party when the guests had just arrived, he had sensed the change in Erin. All through the evening he had watched. Then he had realized the vibration of emotion between Charles Duggan and Erin, but he could not understand why two people who had never met could react so negatively to each other.

He sighed contentedly and held Erin close. A few well-placed questions and some close checking on the background of Charles Duggan would soon tell him what he wanted to know, and he planned on finding out first thing in the morning. If, for some reason, Charles Duggan was any threat to Erin's or his happiness, he would stop him whatever way necessary. With this thought in mind, he pulled Erin's soft, warm body even closer to him and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter 25

When Erin woke next morning, Mitchell was gone as she had expected him to be. She lay and watched the sunlight filter through the closed curtains. There were five days left until she must leave, never to see this place again. She turned her head into the pillow as hot tears filled her eyes. She began to think of how she was going to spend the next five days. She knew that Mitchell still would

ask all the questions she had avoided the night before. How could she keep from answering them and, if she did find something to say, would he believe her?

Rising from the bed, she wrapped herself in the discarded robe and went to the desk. Somehow, she must write two letters: one to Jenny and Thomas Cannon and one to Mitchell. For a long time, she just sat and looked at the blank paper. How could one put the love and respect she felt for these people down on paper in a way they would understand? It took her over an hour just to write the letter to Jenny and Thomas.

Then came the hardest of all . . . Mitchell. How could she explain, what could she say to this man who loved her so much, who had given her so much since the horrible news had come about Gregg? She realized that no matter what words she put on paper, he would still feel he had been used, and brutally, without regard for the love he had for her. Try as she may, the right words would not come and she crumpled the piece of paper into a ball and, in a fit of desperate anger, threw it across the room.

The first letter she folded and put away in a safe place, for—along with the papers she received from Charles when they left—she would send it home. There were still five days. Somehow, she would find the right words to write to Mitchell. In the meantime, she knew

she must evade him and his questions as long as possible.

Quickly, she decided that she would spend some time with Diane. Two or three days would help her think up something. Just knowing that Diane was there to pick up the pieces for Mitchell when she was gone was a consolation. She made up her mind to confide in Diane that she was leaving but not the exact reason why. That way, Diane would be prepared to meet Mitchell's needs. Once she had made up her mind, she rose from the bed and hastily threw some clothes into a small bag. When this was done, she rang for Polly. On Polly's arrival, she quickly snapped orders, much to Polly's surprise. She was dressed and ready to leave before the rest of the household was stirring.

"Now remember, Polly, you are not to say anything until you are asked directly where I am. Then you are only to say that I decided to pay a visit to Diane and that I would be staying a few days. Do you understand, Polly?"

"Yes, Miz Erin, but Mrs. Cannon's going to be upset that we didn't tell her before you left. And what about Mr. Mitchell? He'll be angry with me."

"No, Polly. Mitchell would never take his anger out on you. Polly, I just can't explain right now but it's important that I stay away for a few days. Please help me, Polly. Someday maybe you'll understand. For now, just take my word that it's important to

the welfare of the whole family, especially Mitchell."

"Yes, ma'am," said Polly miserably. "I'll tell them just what you said."

"But not until they come directly and ask you, understand, Polly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Erin kissed Polly on the cheek. "You're a dear friend, Polly. I'm grateful for what you're doing, believe me. If the time ever comes that I can explain my reasons, I will. For now. . . . Good-bye, Polly."

"Oh, Miz Erin." There were tears near the surface of Polly's voice. "You sound like you're going away for a long time. It's really just for a few days, isn't it?"

"Yes, Polly, just for a few days," she replied softly. Gathering her few belongings, she went out the door quietly, leaving an unhappy and unsure Polly to stare after her.

Polly went about her duties with nervous energy, waiting at any moment for someone to ask for Erin.

Slowly, Erin rode toward Diane's home, formulating in her mind the words she would say when she arrived. It was over a two-hour ride to Diane's and, several times, she stopped to walk her tired horse. By the time Diane's house came into view, she had everything she would say straight in her mind. She dismounted in front of Diane's house and walked slowly to the front door; she knocked quickly before her courage would

vanish. A surprised butler answered.

"Are Mr. and Mrs. Morgan in?" she asked quickly.

"Yes, Mrs. Cannon. They're at breakfast."

"Would you tell Miss Diane I'm here, Matthews, and I would like to see her for a few moments, please?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said and asked her to wait in the library for a few minutes. Erin paced the floor, too nervous to sit and wait quietly. It was not long before a smiling Diane came through the door.

"Erin, I'm so glad to see you. I wish I had known you were coming. I would certainly have come out to meet you."

"I came on the spur of the moment, Diane. I hope I'm not inconveniencing you."

"Oh, Erin, don't be silly," she laughed. "You are welcome here any time of the day or night."

"Thank you, Diane. I'm afraid I'm going to impose rather heavily on your hospitality."

For the first time, Diane noticed the quiet tension in Erin's behavior. Looking more closely, she could tell that she had been crying recently.

"Erin," she said quietly, "if you need a friend, I'm here."

"Thank you, Di. I knew I could count on you. Can we go somewhere and talk before I have to explain to your family?"

"Sure, let's go to my room. We can talk there."

Diane did not say anything else until she closed the bedroom door behind them. "What is it, Erin? What has happened?"

Erin took a deep breath and began to explain her situation, even the things that had happened between her and Mitch. She did not try to apologize or justify what had happened. Now she came to the really hard part: explaining to Diane that she was leaving and why.

Diane had sat quietly listening and closely watching Erin, who moved slowly back and forth while she talked. She had been twisting her hands together as she moved. "There is more wrong here than Erin is telling," she thought. "She would never leave the Cannons if it were possible for her to stay. Somehow, someone is forcing her to make a decision. It can't be Mitchell. I wonder. . . ." She did not put her thoughts into words, merely allowed Erin to talk until she had told her everything she intended to say. Instinctively, Diane knew that there was a secret something Erin was not telling her. She decided not to pry any deeper at the moment but to keep her eyes and ears open to find the real cause of Erin's distress.

"When are you going, Erin?" she asked softly. Erin sighed with relief at Diane's acceptance of her story.

"Next week," she said hesitantly. "A ship leaves for Ireland then. I already have my cabin. I'm not taking very much with me, so

if it is all right, I'll stay here until then. The less I have to explain, the easier it will be for all of us."

"Of course it's all right," Diane said aloud. To herself, she was thinking, "That gives me a few days to find the real source of this trouble."

Diane was a woman of complete honesty, with others and with herself. She had always known of Mitchell's love for Erin and, after the news of Gregg's death, she felt she had lost all chance of ever having him. With Erin going away, it would leave the way clear for her; but she wanted Mitchell's happiness first, and if it lay with Erin, then she accepted that as what was meant to be. She went about the motions of making Erin comfortable here but her busy mind had already determined her course of action. As soon as it was possible to get away, she was going to have a private talk with Mitchell. Maybe he would know the real cause of Erin's trouble.

The Morgans spent the rest of the early afternoon hours getting Erin settled, then they let her sleep for awhile for she was emotionally exhausted.

The Cannon household awoke just after Erin left. Polly stayed in Erin's room as long as she possibly could. When there was nothing left for her to do, she left the room reluctantly and went downstairs to the

kitchen. She was just going down the steps as rapidly as possible when she saw Jenny Cannon on her way up.

"Good morning, Mrs. Cannon," she said and tried to move past as quickly as she could, but she did not succeed.

"Polly, is Miss Erin up?"

"Yes, ma'am," she said, volunteering no further answers as Erin had instructed her.

"She hasn't gone out yet, has she?"

"Yes, ma'am, she did."

"Well, she'll probably be right back after her ride. Would you tell her I'd like to see her, Polly?"

"Yes, ma'am, as soon as I see her, Mrs. Cannon."

"Thank you, Polly," Jenny said and continued up the stairs.

Polly breathed a sigh of relief and stood still for a moment to steady her wildly pounding heart. She continued down the stairs just as Mitchell came in the front door. Fast as she tried to move, she did not make the door to the hall leading to the kitchen when she heard his voice call her.

"Polly, wait a minute," he said and walked toward her.

"Oh, God," she groaned inwardly. "There is just no way I can keep a secret from him. He sees right through me."

He had reached her side and smiled at her. "Is Miss Erin up yet?"

"Yes, sir," she said again and hoped he

would ask for no more information.

"Is she dressed?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well," he said impatiently, "is she coming down to breakfast?"

"I think she already had breakfast, sir."

"Is she going riding this morning or not?"

"Yes, sir."

"Polly!" he said, exasperated at what seemed her newly acquired ignorance. "Just what is she doing?"

"Right at this minute, I don't know, sir."

He cast his eyes heavenward, obviously asking for patience. Then suddenly, he looked closer at Polly, who cast her eyes in every direction except at him. He took her gently by the shoulders and forced her to look at him.

"Polly, what is it you're trying so hard not to tell me?"

Polly's lips trembled and he realized she was so frightened of him she was close to tears. He dropped his hands and smiled at her, then in a gentle voice said, "Now, Polly, suppose you tell me just where Erin is and what she's doing."

"Are you asking me exactly, Mr. Mitchell?"

Mitch wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her but he kept his patience with a surprising amount of control. "Yes, Polly. *Exactly* what is she doing and where is she?"

Polly was relieved that she was following Erin's orders to the letter. "She packed some clothes real early this morning and went over to Miss Diane's house to spend a few days."

Mitchell looked stunned and was entirely speechless for a few minutes. Then pieces of his private, mental puzzle started to fall into place.

"How long has she planned to stay, Polly?"

"She said just for a few days, sir."

He nodded his head, his mind drifting away from Polly to the way Erin had avoided his questions the night before. "There is something very wrong here," he thought, "and I intend to get to the bottom of it." He turned to leave, then turned back to Polly. "I'm going to be out the rest of the day, Polly. If my parents should ask, just say I had some business at the bank."

"Yes, sir . . . and Mr. Mitchell?"

"Yes, Polly?"

"You will bring Miss Erin back soon, won't you? I mean . . . you won't let her go away, will you?"

He smiled at her again and his words were gentle as he realized that Polly cared very much for Erin also. "Don't worry, Polly. I'm going to see to it that Miss Erin stays here forever."

With that, he turned away and left the house, but as Polly watched him leave, she felt a heavyhearted feeling. "If only Mr.

Gregg hadn't gone," she thought. "All this misery would never have happened." With leaden feet, she moved through the door and went about her day's work.

Chapter 26

Mitchell did not go directly to Diane's house as he had first thought to do. The instant Polly had told him where Erin had gone, he wanted to rush directly there, grab her violently, if necessary, and drag her back home. He knew how foolish he would have looked. Why shouldn't Erin spend a few days with Diane if she chose to? But then he thought of the night before. She had come into his arms so willingly and full of fire that

he had drowned out all his questions in the wonder of her. Now he realized that she had gone today to escape the same questions. "Why? What was so wrong that Erin couldn't come to him?"

He had the buggy prepared and drove slowly into town. There was only one way to get to the bottom of things and that was to go to the source of the problem, or at least what he considered the source to be.

Leaving his buggy at the livery stable, Mitch made several stops in town. The Cannons had many friends in town, many who were in a position to know about everything that happened. It was late afternoon when he finally paused at the entrance of the bank. He paused only for a second, then opened the door and walked in.

Charles Duggan was seated at his desk in his private office when one of the clerks knocked. When he told him to come in, the young man stood just inside the door.

"There's a gentleman to see you, Mr. Duggan."

"Oh, who is it, Clarkson?"

"Mr. Cannon, sir."

"Which Mr. Cannon, Clarkson?" he asked with a tight, patient smile.

"Mr. Mitchell Cannon, sir."

Charles looked at him for a moment and another kind of smile flickered over his face for a fleeting moment.

"Send the gentleman in, Clarkson, and see

that we're not disturbed." He thought, "this should prove to be interesting."

Clarkson nodded his head with a quiet, "Yes, sir," and left the room. As he made his way back to Mitchell, he had thoughts in his head that would have been of interest to both men had they but known.

"Mr. Duggan will see you now, sir."

"Thank you," Mitch replied and followed Clarkson back to the office, where he held the door open for Mitch to enter, then pulled it softly closed behind him.

Charles rose from behind his desk and extended his hand to Mitchell as he crossed the space between them. Mitchell accepted the handshake but his eyes were on Charles, who did not flicker or show any signs other than that this was purely a friendly visit as one businessman to another. "Mr. Cannon, I'm pleased to see you again. Won't you sit down? Can I get you something to drink?"

"No, thank you. It's too early for me," replied Mitchell as he took the seat opposite Charles. Charles sat back down in his comfortable, leather chair and relaxed, watching Mitchell closely. "What can I do for you, Mr. Cannon?" he asked.

"I've been in town on some business and I thought I would just stop by to talk for a few minutes. Maybe we can reach some kind of agreement on our notes that would be mutually profitable," Mitchell replied coolly.

Charles chuckled inwardly. Like hell he

wanted to discuss the notes. He was suspicious of something between him and Erin. He had noticed Mitchell's observance the night of the dinner party when he and Erin had lingered so long in the garden.

"We've taken everything under advisement, Mr. Cannon. It will come before the board next Friday. Please believe me, I'm sure everything is going to work out well before then."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Mr. Duggan. For awhile, I felt you were interested in just the opposite."

"I'm interested in the welfare of the bank, first, and all its customers."

"You've not been here very long, have you?" Mitchell asked quietly.

"Over a year, Mr. Cannon."

"Why choose a small town like this? A man of your obvious experience would do well in a large city."

Again, Charles laughed to himself. Maybe he should tell him. It might be interesting to see his face when he found he had lost everything, including Erin. No, he would follow his plans as he had made them. By this time the following week, he and Erin would be gone. "I like this town, Mr. Cannon. It holds many things of interest to me. I intend to get a great deal from here."

"He's certainly a cool customer," thought Mitchell. "I imagine he usually gets what he wants."

"You're Irish, aren't you? Did your whole family come from Ireland with you?"

"I'm Irish, yes, Mr. Cannon. But I'm very much alone here. My parents are deceased and I've never married so I've no family here."

"My sister-in-law is an Irish girl. Perhaps you know of her family, Murry?"

"Murry . . . Murry. No, I don't think I know any Murrays. But then there are a lot of Murrays in Ireland," he laughed.

"I thought perhaps you might have met before?"

Charles was enjoying the game immensely, sensing that Mitchell was close to finding out everything but Charles was secure in the knowledge that by the time he did, it would be too late.

"No, we've never met before last evening, I'm sorry to say."

He was going to add that he had heard she and Mitchell were going to marry but he realized Mitchell was too quick to let that slip by. He would know immediately it was Erin who had told him. Before he could say anything else, Mitchell supplied the same words he was thinking.

"Erin and I expect to marry within the next month."

"I see," said Charles quietly. Now it was his turn. "Your brother . . . ah, has not been deceased for very long, has he?" He smiled inwardly at the narrowing of Mitchell's eyes

and the slight tightening of the muscles in his jaw, the only signs of anger he displayed.

"Almost ten months. Erin is a lovely person, and we want very much for her to be happy here. She's lonely and, since she also lost her brother in the shipwreck, she has no family to protect her except us. But she is very dear to us all and, make no mistake, protect her we will from anything...or anyone that might cause her pain." Mitchell gazed intently into Charles's eyes as he spoke softly. "Now that Erin has promised to marry me, I take it on myself to be her personal protector. I am not a man of little power. I assure you I can take care of my own."

Charles rose slowly from his chair with a slight smile on his face but his eyes were like two cold daggers. Mitchell felt the piercing eyes even as Charles spoke softly to him. "I've hit home," he thought. "There is something here I should know about."

"I'm sure you will, Mr. Cannon. Now, if you will excuse me? I hate to rush you but I have a heavy schedule and the day is shortening rapidly." He extended his hand again and Mitchell took it.

"Of course, Mr. Duggan. I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time. You say the board meets Friday. I'm sure they will go along with us for the next few months. If we can count on you to speak on our behalf?"

"I'll do what I can, Mr. Cannon. I assure

you I shall do everything in my power to bring this situation to a mutual agreement."

"Thank you, Mr. Duggan, and good day, sir."

"Good-bye, Mr. Cannon."

Mitchell turned and left the room, closing the door quietly behind him.

Charles sat back down at his desk and contemplated the closed door through which Mitchell Cannon had just exited. "He's a clever man," he thought. "Too clever."

He sent for Clarkson and when the young clerk appeared, he handed him an envelope. "Clarkson, deliver this note to Captain Pears on the ship *Sea Nymph* and wait for an answer," he said.

"Yes, sir," said Clarkson and, taking the note, he left immediately. Charles sat back in his chair relaxed again and readjusted his plans. They would leave a day earlier than he had planned and his destination would also be different. Charles had prepared himself several ways of escaping with Erin. Once his plans were clear in his mind, he smiled again to himself and resumed his work.

It was after almost two hours had passed and near closing time when the knock he expected came. "Come in."

Young Clarkson came in and handed him the answer to his note.

"Thank you. You may leave for the night, Clarkson. I'll close up."

"Thank you, sir, and good night, Mr.

Duggan."

"Good night."

After the door had closed behind him, Charles opened the letter and smiled at its contents. "The *Sea Nymph* will be ready to sail whenever you say. Yes, I can marry anyone on board ship. I've told everyone we're leaving for Ireland on Thursday. R.P."

Charles's smile turned into a chuckle as he began to realize fully that he was going to succeed and, within a few short hours, Erin would be his and the Cannons would not even know where they had gone.

Mitchell left Charles's office with a deep feeling of unrest. Every instinct told him to get to Erin as soon as possible and keep her beside him until he found out what was wrong. It was the first time in Mitchell Cannon's life that he ignored his instincts. It was to be one time he would regret it. Instead, he went home and joined his parents for dinner. After dinner, he waited patiently for the messages he expected from town.

Erin and Diane were sitting in their drawing room after dinner. Diane's parents had gone out for the night and they were alone. Since she had had no opportunity to get any information that day, Diane knew no more about the situation than what Erin had already told her. She watched Erin closely and could discover no more than the fact that she was extremely nervous and very

much afraid. They were conversing quietly when the butler entered the room.

"There's a young man here, Miss Morgan. He says he has a message for Mrs. Cannon."

"Mrs. Cannon isn't feeling well. Please tell him to leave the message with you," replied Diane.

"Yes, ma'am," the butler replied and turned away.

"Wait," said Erin quickly. "Tell him I'll be there in a moment."

The butler bowed slightly and left the room.

"Erin..." began Diane, "I thought you didn't want to see anyone?"

"I don't, but this is just a message and it might be important," she replied. Then she rose and left the room. Erin went to the door to find a young man there. He handed her the envelope. "I was told to give this only to you, Mrs. Cannon. Then I'm to wait for an answer."

She tore the envelope open and read the contents. Slowly, her face drained of color and the young man, thinking she was about to faint, took a step toward her. She looked up at him. "Tell him the answer is, 'I understand, and I will do what I have to,'" she said in a tight, small voice.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. For a minute, he watched this pretty, young girl with the white, strained face and for some reason felt a deep flush of sympathy for her. Then he

turned away and closed the door after him.

Erin looked again at the note in her hand. It read, "Our plans have changed. We sail tonight at eleven. Ride to the dock and we will send your horse back. You may bring along one person to carry back the papers. Do not fail me or by midnight the Cannons will be ruined. I expect you at eleven o'clock. The ship is the *Sea Nymph*. We will be married on board. C."

She crumpled the note and thrust it in her pocket as Diane came out of the drawing room. At the first sight of her face, she moved quickly to Erin's side. "Erin! What is it? What's wrong?"

Erin gathered herself together as best she could and turned to Diane. "I . . . I'd like to be alone for awhile, Diane. Please . . . I'm sorry, I don't mean to hurt you but. . . ."

"I understand, Erin," she said softly. "If you want to talk later, I'll be in my room."

Erin nodded her head and moved slowly up the stairs. She closed the bedroom door behind her. There were no more tears to be shed. Numbly, she sat down at the desk and reached for a paper and pen. It was almost nine o'clock now. She had two hours. Somehow, in that time, she had to compose a letter to Mitch, pack what she could carry and slip out of the house.

The clock said quarter past ten when she put the dark cloak over her shoulders and

covered her head with the hood. Then she quietly slipped out of the door and down the darkened hall toward the stairs. She stood at the top of the stairs and looked down. Everyone was asleep. The house was dark and quiet. She moved slowly down the stairs and out the door. Crossing the lawn swiftly, she went to the stable. Two of the stablemen were waiting for the return of Diane's parents. They were both taken by surprise when she entered.

"Hitch up the small buggy and one of you accompany me. I want you to bring some papers back with you," she said.

They looked at each other in surprise but did not question her. One never knew what these rich ladies would take into their heads to do.

When the buggy was ready, Erin got in silently and one of the men joined her. Within minutes, Diane's house was left behind and they were on their way to the dock.

Charles met the buggy and helped her down. "You're right on time, my dear," he said softly. She looked up into his eyes. "Give me the papers, Charles," she said, extending her hand palm upward to him.

He chuckled. He could afford to be generous. He had everything he wanted. Plenty of money and Erin. He took the papers from his pocket and handed them to her. She opened them and gave them a quick glance, then refolded them. He laughed aloud at that.

"Don't you trust me, Erin?"

"No, Charles," she said firmly. "I know you."

He flushed a little at that then pushed it aside. "Hurry up, our ship leaves in ten minutes."

She took the papers and the two letters she had written and handed them to the stable-boy. "Take these back and give them to Miss Diane when she awakes," she said.

He took the packets and she watched him leave, then she turned to Charles. "I'm ready," she said, quietly.

He took her arm and they climbed the gangplank. Within a few minutes, the ship was moving slowly out of the harbor toward the open sea. She stood at the rail and watched the land recede. About a mile from the harbor, they passed close by another ship on the way in. Erin turned away and went below to her cabin. If she had stayed on deck a few more minutes, she might have watched the men moving about the deck of the ship that passed so close to them. She might even have seen the blonde, bearded man who was leaning on the rail, watching the lights of home grow closer.

The stableboy brought the buggy into the stable at the same time the Morgans arrived home. When he was questioned about where he had been, he explained the late night journey and gave them the packet he had

been told to deliver. Diane stared at the papers in shock when her parents wakened her with the news of Erin's departure. Her quick mind sorted the information rapidly and she ordered her horse saddled.

"You cannot ride about alone at this time of night," her father said. "I'll go with you."

They rode to the Cannon house together and both were surprised to find the lights still on in one of the downstairs rooms at that time of the morning. Diane's father knocked on the front door and, after a short wait, it was opened by Mitchell who was still dressed. He had received all the information he had asked for and more. At that moment, he was contemplating a confrontation with Charles Duggan the next morning.

"Diane! What? . . ."

"Mitch, Erin's gone," she panted.

"Gone!" he repeated. "Gone where?"

Wordlessly, she handed him the papers. He opened the letter addressed to him.

"Dear Mitchell, please find it in your heart to forgive me. I am doing what I have to do for the good of all. When you read this, I will be gone back to Ireland with Charles Duggan. The papers will explain the necessity. Please, please believe this, that I love you all very dearly and would never let you be hurt. Good-bye, Erin."

He opened the balance of the papers and read them slowly. Then, telling Diane and her father to wait for a moment, he went

upstairs and wakened his parents. When they had joined the others, he explained that Erin had left and silently handed the papers to his father. Mr. Cannon read them and then slowly raised his eyes to meet the pain-filled eyes of his son.

"Is is true, father?" Mitch asked in a gentle voice.

"Is this what he used to get at Erin?"

"Yes. It's powerful enough to make her do what he wants, wouldn't you say?"

"Yes, it's powerful evidence and true, as far as it goes. I did acquire my first ship and the start of my fortune by acts of piracy, and I am responsible for the acts I am accused of in these papers. But they do not go on to say that I was granted a pardon by the King in return for special services I rendered him. If Erin read these and believes them, she must still think I could be arrested and hung on this evidence."

"Then nothing can happen to you, father?" Mitch questioned, his face brightening for the first time in several hours.

"No, son, I'm a completely free man, although I'm sure he has convinced Erin otherwise."

"That rotten, blackhearted bastard! I'm going to make him wish he had never been born," said Mitchell vehemently. "Can I make use of the *Golden Eagle*, father? I'm going to follow them and when I catch up with them, Duggan will regret the day he

ever crossed paths with the Cannons."

"Of course, Mitchell. Take the *Golden Eagle*. Bring Erin back to us where she belongs."

If ever anything was to shake Mitchell Cannon's world to the very foundation, and cause more conflicting pain, it was the softly drawled words that came from the young man leaning against the door frame.

"Bring Erin back from where, brother?" he asked quietly.

All eyes turned toward the door and each face registered its own painful reaction. Diane's face registered stunned disbelief, Mr. and Mrs. Cannon's reflected sheer joy at the return of the son they thought dead so long ago. Mitchell felt all the strength run slowly from his body and the warm flood of pain that replaced it almost made him cry out. He squared his shoulders and turned to meet the eyes of his brother.

Chapter 27

Gregg walked from the water shaking his head and rubbing his hands through his hair to free it from the moisture. He watched Tia and Sean as they neared the beach and rose also from the salty water, where a large group of the villagers had gathered for a late evening swim.

Angus, as usual, sat in front of his hut with a drink in his hand and enjoyed the sight. Now his bushy, fiery-red brows were

drawn together in a frown and the lips that usually smiled were closed and tight as he watched Gregg. The boy had become like a son to him in the months since they had been rescued from the sea and he felt a deep sympathy for his unhappiness. Although Gregg tried, lately he could not seem to hide the feeling of impatience and longing for the ship to come that would take him home.

Tia and Sean, so happy in one another, cavorted and played together in the surf like children, and Angus watched closely the way Gregg averted his eyes from them at such times, and the look of quiet desperation on his face when he did look their way.

"That damn ship had better come soon," he thought. It was hard to watch Gregg's unhappiness grow day by day and not be able to do anything to help him. He watched him now stroll slowly in his direction and, when he reached Angus's side, he lowered himself to the seat beside him and closed his eyes with a sigh that was not of contentment.

The red rim of the sun was all that could be seen over the horizon and it flashed the last, faint tinges of orange into the early evening sky. The swimmers were dark silhouettes now as their happy laughter drifted back to the two men seated in silence watching them.

"Angus?"

"Yes, laddie?"

"Do you think it's possible the ship could arrive anytime soon?"

"That's the same question you ask me every other day, boy. I can only give you the same answer. I don't know, I just don't know."

"Christ, Angus! It's been almost ten months since we got here. Surely it should be here soon."

There was an anguish in his voice that Angus knew and understood all too well. "What can I say to you, boy? I deliberately cut myself away from civilization when I came here. Now there's no way we can do anything for you until the ship comes."

"I've just got this terrible feeling, Angus, that I've got to get home. Erin needs me. My family needs me. I've got to get off this island," he exclaimed angrily, pounding his fist on the arm of the chair.

"I wish there was something I could do to help, Gregg, but there's just no way."

Gregg leapt up from the chair. "I'm going for a walk. I can't stand to just sit here and think." With that, he turned away and started down the beach away from the swimmers. Angus watched his receding form with sympathetic eyes. "That ain't all that's botherin' you, Gregg, my boy. Maybe I can't get you off the island until the ship comes, but I can sure do something about your other problems."

Gregg moved slowly down the beach. He didn't want to talk to anyone. He let his mind drift back in time as it had taken to doing a lot of lately. Erin's face floated before him.

The long, dark hair that flowed about her small, white face. Those eyes filled with love and trust looking up into his. He could feel the soft warmth of her body against his and couldn't control the ache of desire that filled him. He wanted Erin so badly he could taste the sweet taste of her mouth against his if he closed his eyes. He had caught himself lately watching Amera as she carried in the breakfast or moved about her duties. The way her strong, young body had moved gracefully beneath the piece of material all the island girls wore wrapped about them. He had felt the stirrings of guilty desire as he watched. His healthy, young body had reacted in spite of what his mind told him. He could never love anyone as he loved Erin, but all this time away from her left his body demanding release from the pent-up tension.

After he was gone from sight, Angus sat quietly contemplating an idea that had sprung up. When the next morning arrived, he was still engrossed in his private thoughts. Then after a short time, he beckoned one of the children to him. The child ran to his side with her happy eyes aglow and a smile on her lips; for Angus was undisputed king of this island, loved and respected by all, and to be called to him was something she would brag about later to her friends. She waited with an expectant smile on her face for Angus to tell her what to do.

"Would you run and tell Amera that I

would like to see her?" he asked gently.

She nodded her head rapidly, pleased to do anything he asked, then turned and darted away as fast as her legs would carry her. It did not take her long to find Amera for she was where the child expected her to be: in Gregg's hut, puttering about, making it as nice as she possibly could. Everyone teased Amera unmercifully, for everyone knew of her feelings for Gregg except him. Amera was a gentle creature who had given her heart silently to this handsome, young man they had rescued from the sea. She knew, for Angus had made it clear to her, that he belonged to another who loved him and whom he loved completely; but that did not stop her from loving him and taking pleasure in what she could share of his presence. Doing the small things for him that made him smile and turn an appreciative glance toward her now and then. She was doing just that when the child found her.

"Mr. McAllum wants to see you, Amera," the child said with a quick smile, for though they teased Amera, they all loved her for her kind, gentle ways.

"Me? Why?"

"I don't know. He just said to go get you," the child answered with a small shrug of her shoulders. Then she was gone before Amera could question her any further. Amera put aside what she was doing and went immediately to Angus's hut. When she arrived there,

she stood quietly in front of him.

"You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, Amera. Come, sit down beside me. I have to talk to you about something and I want you to listen closely to me and try to understand."

She dropped down gracefully on the ground and looked up at him with an expectant, trusting gaze, which grew wide-eyed with happy wonder as he slowly and quietly explained the situation to her. After he had finished, he asked her if she was agreeable to what he suggested. Before he was even finished, she was nodding her head slowly, for what he suggested was what her dreams had been made of lately.

"You understand that he belongs to another woman and that when the ship comes he must be free to leave?" he asked quietly.

"I understand, and I would do nothing to make it difficult for him. I would be happy just to share the remaining days with him," she replied.

"Good. Now you go get Sean and then I will leave the rest up to you."

"Why Sean?" she asked.

"Sean is the brother of the woman to whom Gregg belongs. It is important that he understands what will happen. Gregg does not need an angry brother at this moment."

She smiled at Angus. He was so wise, he thought of everything. Her happy heart fluttered with expectancy as she rose to leave

him. After she had given the message to Sean, she went to her own hut to prepare herself for the coming evening.

The day was long and tedious for Gregg, who had walked for awhile, then joined the men of the village in fishing for the evening meal. After that, he had moved about the island restlessly in search of any kind of labor that would help release some of the pressure of his healthy, demanding body.

Later, they sat around the evening meal; he, Sean and Angus, along with most of the village men while the women served them. Gregg ate little and was so preoccupied that he did not notice the difference in the atmosphere. Sean watched him as closely as possible while they ate and saw the rightness of what Angus had told him that afternoon. At first, it had angered and alarmed him that Gregg should have another woman while married to his sister. It had been Tia with her blunt honesty who had straightened out his mind.

"If you were away from me and did not know if you were ever going to see me again, I would understand. I know of your passion, Sean, for I share it. Could you go without me or any other woman for the rest of your life? Be honest with yourself, Sean, and have a little more pity for Gregg. He has fought this like a man but it is against nature to do so forever. What if the ship never comes? What if a storm has sunk it as yours was? Would

you expect him to remain as he is for the rest of his life if the ship never comes?"

"No, but. . ."

"Amera understands even if you do not. She will comfort him now and ask for only what he is free to give. When the time comes for him to go, she will also accept that."

"Tia," he said, calmly now, "God must have saved you as a special blessing for me. I'm sure grateful I found you. I know deep in my heart that you're right. I guess I was only thinking of how Erin would feel."

"Erin will never know. But if her man comes back to her, he will go as a whole man and with only good thoughts of those he leaves here, and he will take with him our love and respect."

He smiled as his arms circled her and pulled her gently against him. He held her for a long time before he spoke again.

"I guess I know how Gregg must feel now," he said against her hair. "If I ever lost you, Tia, it would be like losing part of my body. He must have been going through the tortures of the damned for the last few months, seeing us so happy and having all the things he left behind. If he ever asks me, I will tell him I understand and it will always remain between us."

She smiled and wrapped her arms about him and looked up into his eyes with the glint of mischievous laughter on her face. "But do not think you will ever be forgiven if you

stray. I will share you with no other woman while I live."

He chuckled as his lips found hers and for a while they were lost to all else except the warmth of the love they had for each other.

Now Sean watched Gregg rise to leave the remains of his food uneaten. He left the table and returned to his own hut although the thing farthest from his mind was any attempt at sleep. Lifting the cover that hung over his door, he went inside and dropped down across the bed. With his arms behind his head, he was preparing himself mentally as best he could for another long, sleepless night.

He could hear the village sounds slowly quieting for the night and, after over an hour, there was a stillness interrupted only occasionally by a night animal and the soft, rolling sound of the sea. He was in a state of semisleep, just on the edge of wakefulness when the door cover was again drawn aside and Amera stood just inside the door. He lay very still watching her, for he could not suddenly adjust his mind to the fact that she really was there.

"I may come in and speak to you for awhile, Gregg?" she asked softly.

He sat up quickly now, his hungry glance taking in the beauty of her as she stood bathed in the moonlight. He tried his best to control the physical reaction of his body but was far from successful.

"It's very late, Amera. Shouldn't you be asleep by now?" He asked the question even though his mind was already accepting the reason for her presence.

She moved slowly to his side, her hips swaying gracefully beneath the single piece of cloth that covered them. Sinking slowly to her knees in front of him, she looked up into his eyes. Then, very slowly and deliberately, she put her hands on his shoulders and slid them gently about his neck. This was beyond what any normal man could bear and he grabbed her arms forcefully and held them tightly as he looked at her.

"I am not a man free to marry you, Amera. I wait now for the ship to take me back home. A woman waits there who holds my heart. There is no way I will stay here when the ship comes. You must understand and believe that it hurts me deeply." He chuckled. "More deeply than you know, but I don't want to have Angus angry with me for seducing one of his maidens. If you stay for one more minute, that's exactly what's going to happen. Now you'd best go quickly before I change my mind."

"But, Gregg, I do understand and so does Angus; in fact, it was his idea. He did not have to force me, for it is something I have dreamed of since I first saw you. I know that you will leave but, for now, let me make the time easier for you. It would give me much happiness."

"Angus knows you're here?" he almost shouted.

"Shh . . . Angus only asked me if I was willing. He left the decision to me. Oh, Gregg, I want to be your woman even if it's only for a short while." With these words, she swayed her body against him. For a moment, Gregg gave a guilty thought to Erin but the nearness of Amera's soft, willing body had sent his senses trembling and he released her arms, letting her put them about his neck again. As his arms slid around her, he pulled her up on the bed beside him and took her willing lips with his.

Amera curved her long, slender body to his and, as he slid his hands over her body and loosened the piece of material that stood between them, she sighed contentedly. His lovemaking was gentle, as gentle as the beautiful creature he held so tightly in his arms and, as he possessed her, he knew a different kind of beauty than he had experienced before. It was lovemaking filled with gratitude for her giving. She knew it for what it was and accepted it. They moved together and the soft words that she whispered in his ear told him of her deep pleasure.

Toward morning, she awakened but she did not move. He had his arm about her and her head rested on his chest where she could hear the steady throbbing of his heart. She nestled contentedly against him and put one

leg over his body. At her movement, he stirred and mumbled in his sleep. "Erin, Erin, my sweet," he sighed, and his hands caressed her, pulling her against him tightly as he settled back into a deep sleep.

She lay awake for a long time and, deep in her mind, she prayed to the ancient gods of her people, the gods that Angus had tried to displace with his own but had never succeeded. Now she closed her eyes and mentally chanted the prayer to their God.

"I do not wish his unhappiness," she prayed. "But if the gods will it, keep the ship from arriving soon. Let me keep this happiness for as long as I can."

Now she contentedly nestled against him and drifted off into a deep, contented sleep. When she awoke next morning, Gregg was gone and she sat up on the bed and allowed herself the luxury of enjoying her position.

Gregg walked to Angus's hut and lifted the door covering to find Angus at breakfast. "Angus! I want to talk to you," he said.

Angus leaned back in his chair and smiled up at him like an innocent child. "Now, Gregg, my boy, if you had come to me like that last night, I might have been afraid. But since you waited until this morning, I don't really think you have anything to shout at me about, now do you?"

The two men looked at each other; then Angus began to chuckle and soon Gregg joined him. The chuckle grew to laughter

and Gregg sank down on a chair opposite Angus.

"Why, Angus?"

"You needed her, boy," he answered softly, "and she needed you. That's all there is to it. For the rest of your time here, accept it just as it is and when you have to go, you go with the freedom of spirit you came with."

Slowly, Gregg walked back to his hut and found Amera waiting with a warm smile. He smiled in return and stretched out his arms to her.

Chapter 28

The days rolled on and on in what Gregg considered an unending slowness. His urgent desire to get home had not lessened with the coming of Amera. He had to admit she made the nights bearable but there was nagging pressure in the back of his mind about the position of his family now that they had lost the cargo from the *Amy C.* And Erin . . . Erin, he thought with panic. What if after thinking him dead, she found some-

one else. He pushed the thought away violently. It was something he could not stand to face. "She'll be there," he thought; then, without realizing he was saying the words aloud, he repeated, "She must be there, she must!"

The morning after Amera had come to him, he and Sean had gone fishing together. For the first few minutes, the atmosphere between them was a trifle strained, mostly because neither knew exactly what to say to ease the situation.

"Sean. . . ."

Sean looked at him with a quick smile. "We'd better get this settled, Gregg. I know the situation and I understand it. I probably would do the same were I in your position. Let's not let this spoil a good family relationship."

Gregg breathed a sigh of relief; and they laughed together and were talking of other things when Angus came upon them and watched them for awhile before they knew he was there.

"Ah, it's too bad they ever have to leave here," he thought. "If that little girl of his were here, I'd bet he'd be contented to stay."

Since Angus had arrived on his island, he had never missed his children as he now did; for Gregg and Sean had become much like the sons he had not seen for almost twenty years. He shouted at them and waved and they waved in return as he started down the

beach toward them. Although they spent the morning fishing for the evening meal, Angus could still see plainly the urgency deep in Gregg to go home.

Spending the days in sun-kissed leisure was totally against Gregg's nature. He had to find something to occupy his time and his mind.

It was Sean who came up with the idea. It took both Angus and Tia by surprise, but excited Gregg.

"Gregg, help me build a house," he said.

"A house! You mean . . . ?"

"I mean a house, a real house. Like at home with two stories and lots of rooms and a huge dining room and a ballroom."

Gregg was laughing now and even Angus could see the humor in it but Tia did not understand at all. She shook her head at what she considered insanity by all three and walked away.

"Sean, my boy," said Angus, "I hate to spoil your plans but you can't build a two-story house around here. When the gale winds come, and they do, it'll take the top right off."

"Not if you build it right against the side of the mountain, and you could see for a million miles from the front door," he exclaimed excitedly.

Gregg and Sean began to plan in earnest and soon had a workable plan for a large house. It took three weeks to chop down trees and notch them properly. Gregg was enjoy-

ing himself thoroughly, even though he wasn't too sure just what the finished product was going to look like.

They were trying to figure out what they could use for the roof when Gregg's eyes were caught by a movement on the horizon. He shaded his eyes with his hand but could see nothing else but the endless miles of blue sea. "This was really getting to me," he thought. Every shadow made him jump.

"Sean, let's call it enough for today. I'd like to go to talk to Angus for awhile and I promised Amera we'd go for a swim tonight. I'll see you tomorrow."

Sean agreed and they both left the scene of their artistic endeavor to go home.

When Gregg arrived at Angus's hut, he found him in his usual place, seated just outside the front door nursing his evening drink. Gregg sat down beside him and reached for a cup to dip into the container of homemade liquor that Angus always seemed to have. They drank in silence for awhile, then Gregg asked him quietly, "If we could build a house, Angus, why couldn't we build a boat?"

"I know how badly you want to leave, boy, but it's really impossible to build a boat. It requires things the island can't produce."

Gregg sighed and dipped his cup for another drink. He had taken to drinking more than Angus would have liked, but he understood the reason behind it.

"I knew that, Angus. It was just another way of trying to fool myself into thinking I'd ever get off this island."

Again, the cup was dipped as he settled himself deeply into the chair and propped up his feet on a bench. They sat in silence for awhile, sipping their drinks and watching a large, red evening sun nestle itself contentedly down on the horizon.

"Have you eaten, Gregg?"

"No, I'm not hungry tonight," he replied quietly with another dipping of his cup.

Angus could see that he was deliberately drinking to stop the pressures of his troubled mind. Slowly, one by one, the silver glint of the stars could be seen against the steadily darkening sky. Gregg's form blurred, became a silhouette and finally just a dark shadow seated beside him. He could hear the occasional dip of the cup as he refilled it again and again.

The time slipped away slowly and soon Angus saw Amera leave Gregg's hut and start in their direction. She was close enough to see his gesture as he motioned her to leave Gregg be. She stopped and took in the scene with one understanding glance. Turning about, she went back to the hut and after pausing for a quick look over her shoulder went in.

From the front of Angus's hut you could see for miles out to sea. The water was dark now with the soft glint of a full, white moon

sending a path across the waves. Gregg stood up slowly and Angus could see him clearly in the light of the moon. He was staring out to sea.

"You know, Angus, this evening I was sure I saw a ship on the horizon. For just a moment, I could see her as clearly as though she was right here."

"You're driving yourself crazy, Gregg. You've got to stop this and get hold of yourself."

"I know," said Gregg in a whisper, and he bent forward to dip his cup again in the liquor.

"And you've got to slow down on the drinking," Angus said quietly.

Gregg looked at the cup in his hand as though he were seeing it for the first time and a feeling of panic came over him. "My God, Angus," he said with a groan, "have I been drinking that much?"

Angus nodded.

"I . . . I didn't realize. . . ."

"I know you didn't, boy," Angus said softly. "And if I weren't beginning to worry about it, I never would have said anything. But you can't lean on it, Gregg. It'll kill you."

Gregg was still staring at the cup in his hand. Then suddenly, in one violent motion, he threw the cup as far as he could. Angus chuckled and stood up next to Gregg; putting his hand on his shoulder, he said, "Good. I

wish you could have all your problems solved that easily. But you can't, so it's time you got hold of yourself. The ship will come in due time and you will go home. Remember, boy, things turn out the way the good Lord intends them and there's no use fighting against it."

"I guess I'd better go home and get some sleep if Sean and I are going to work on the house tomorrow."

Angus gave a short laugh. "That house will never stand up against a storm here. All the work is for nothing."

"It keeps me busy, Angus. It's easier not to think when I'm busy."

He turned to leave and Angus watched him go back to his own hut and step inside. Angus sat back down and dipped another drink for himself. Slowly, the village settled for the night. Children were called inside and after quite some time, everything became quiet. Angus sat very still and listened to the night sounds and the soft brush of the sea against the sand. The view was spectacular and he sat thoroughly enjoying it.

As the moon rose higher in the night sky, it bathed the island in a soft, glowing light. It was bright enough to see for miles to sea. He was just about to tip his cup to his lips again when over the rim, he saw the quick flicker of movement. Slowly, he lowered the cup to his lap and sat watching intently through nar-

rowed eyes. Yes! There it was; a small dark spot on the horizon. Angus leaned back in his chair now and a smile lit his face. Although he knew it would not reach the island until sometime the next day, it was the expected ship—of that he was sure. There was only one person who knew where this island was located: the man who stopped once a year to bring Angus some things he considered necessary and to keep him informed of the outside world. It was the one and only contact he kept open to the outside and this was the only time he had not been hesitant but anxious to see the ship arrive.

He watched the small, black dot on the horizon. It did not seem to grow any larger and by Angus's figuring, it should reach the island by noon the next day. He sat back in his chair with a contented smile. There was no use in waking Gregg tonight. He would go to his hut first thing in the morning. He sighed and took another sip of his drink, closing his eyes and lifting his head to catch a soft, evening breeze.

Angus called out, then entered Gregg's hut the next day just after sunrise. Although Amera was moving about, Gregg was still sleeping soundly. Amera stopped her movements when Angus arrived. She looked at his delighted face with a sinking heart. All her prayers to her gods had gone unanswered.

She knew the ship had arrived as surely as she knew her own thoughts. She and Angus looked at each other across the room. Each knew the other's thoughts and understood them completely.

"The ship?" she asked softly.

Angus nodded his head slowly and watched her. She stood quite still for some time looking at Gregg's still sleeping form across the room.

"You knew it would come soon, Amera. You understood."

She nodded her head and he could feel her gathering herself together. Then slowly, she went to Gregg's bed. She knelt down beside him and touched his shoulder.

"Gregg, Gregg."

Slowly, he rolled over and looked up at her, half-awake and half-asleep. When he looked from Amera to Angus, the realization came to him.

"Angus?"

"Aye, laddie buck. She'll be here about noon. Come and see for yourself. Her white sails are full and she's comin' fast."

Now he could not seem to move fast enough. To Angus's delighted laughter, he fumbled into his clothes, cursing his fingers that seemed to be all thumbs. Then he rushed to the door and Angus stepped aside to let him pass. Running down to the beach, he found that Tia and Sean were already there.

Shading his eyes with his hands, he looked out to sea. Gregg felt he had never seen a more beautiful thing in his life as the full, white sails of the ship moving rapidly in their direction.

"She's beautiful, Sean!" he laughed happily. "The most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

Sean was smiling and Tia's eyes glowed happily at Gregg's enthusiasm.

By noon, the ship was sitting at anchor as close as she could come to the shore, and a longboat was being rowed in the direction of the beach.

The man who stepped ashore held out his hand to Angus, and Angus took it eagerly. Then they both laughed and flung their arms mightily about each other with shouts of laughter and language that made even Sean and Gregg openmouthed in surprise. It was clear to them where Tia had learned to talk.

After a few more minutes of this, Angus turned to Sean and Gregg. "Gregg, Sean, I want you to meet my brother, Ian. Ian, these are two young bucks I picked out of the ocean. This one would like a ride home with you."

Ian cast a quick, hard look at Angus but when he saw his brother's eyes, he smiled again. The two men were almost the same size and both had the same flaming, red hair and deep, green eyes. Ian turned to Gregg

and Sean and held out his hand. They accepted it gratefully.

"You've no idea how happy I am to see you, sir," said Gregg, shaking the hand firmly.

"Well, I'll be sailin' on the mornin' tide so you'd best be aboard by then. I've just to unload some things for Angus here, then we'll be leavin'."

"I'll be aboard, sir. I've been ready for almost a year now," laughed Gregg.

"Good!" said Captain McAllum. Then he turned to Angus. "I've a lot of things to tell you. Can we talk now for awhile?"

"Aye," said Angus quietly, looking at Gregg. "I think Gregg has someone to talk to also."

It was the first guilty thought Gregg had given to Amera, left standing alone in his hut. He looked miserably at Angus, then walked quickly in the direction of his hut. But when he got there, Amera was nowhere to be seen. Although he looked everywhere for her, she had completely disappeared. Then one last place occurred to him.

Slowly, he made his way up the side of the mountain to the place where he and Sean had begun the house. There, huddled in a corner crying softly, he found Amera. Gently, he took her in his arms and held her. There was nothing he could say now to ease the pain of parting, so he simply held her without words. After awhile, she turned her body to his and

he made love to her in a last, passionate farewell. Then he lifted her to her feet and kissed her gently. Taking her hand in his, they made their way back down the mountain to the waiting ship.

Chapter 29

Sean and Tia were waiting impatiently on the beach next morning along with Angus and Amera and almost all the other villagers. They waved a last farewell as Gregg climbed into the boat and was rowed out to the ship. They stood together for a long time and watched the sails unfurl and the ship move gracefully out toward the open sea. Wordlessly, they turned away when the ship was a small white speck on the horizon.

Angus put his arm about Amera's shoulder and slowly they made their way back to the village.

Gregg leaned on the rail and watched the island slowly disappear. He wondered if he would ever see them again. He had no idea how to get back here and Angus's brother was the only one who did. Would Ian tell him if he ever wanted to return? Somehow Gregg had the feeling that would be a very hard thing to accomplish. Ian joined him at the rail and they watched the slowly receding island in silence.

"It's a shame Angus can't leave and come home," said Gregg.

"There's nothing for Angus to come back to, Gregg. He is a wanted man in his own country. No; he's happy here. Believe me," he added softly, "Angus deserves all the happiness he can get. He suffered enough for it."

"I think I'm really going to miss them."

"Then why not stay?"

"I've a lot of unfinished business that I have to see to."

"Why don't you come below for a bit of lunch and maybe if you care to, you could tell me just what's come about since I've seen Angus last."

He followed the Captain below and after they finished lunch, they talked. Gregg found Ian McAllum as fine a man as he thought his brother was. Over the next few weeks, they talked much and rapidly became

friends. Gregg pulled his own weight with the crew and worked long, hard hours. They were better hours than the ones he spent tossing and turning in impatient misery on his bunk.

It was almost five weeks later, close to midnight when the lights at the harbor came in view. Gregg was at the rail watching. There was a ship leaving the harbor and they were passing within calling distance of each other. Gregg watched it as it moved out of sight, then turned his gaze back to the lights of home. It seemed to him that it took forever to bring the ship up to the dock even though the job was done as smoothly as he had ever seen it done before.

He said good-bye to Captain McAllum and searched for almost half an hour for transportation to his parents' house. He stepped down from the buggy and stood looking at it. Home! It gave him a choking feeling in his throat to find out how close he had come to never seeing it again. Then something else struck him. There was another buggy tied outside the house and, at two in the morning, all the lights were still on. Something was dreadfully wrong. What if something had happened to his parents or . . . or Erin?

He moved quickly now up the steps and opened the front door. The sound of voices came to him. He moved toward them, not quite being able to make out what they were saying. He leaned against the open doorway

for a few minutes watching the people in the room. What were Diane and her father doing here at this time of night and seeming to be in deep distress? And Erin, where was Erin? Then he heard his brother's voice deep and filled with anger.

"I'm going after her, mother."

With a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, he realized who they were talking about. He had to make sure.

"Going after whom, brother?" he asked quietly.

He did expect a sudden reaction after all the time they had thought him dead, but he did not expect the reaction he got. He had expected laughter, smiles and eager arms. Instead, they turned shocked eyes to him. His mother gave a low cry and ran to him. He caught her close in his arms.

"Gregg, oh, my son!" she cried. He held her away from him now and looked down on her pale face and pain-filled eyes. He looked from her to his father, then Diane. Finally, his eyes turned to Mitchell. Mitchell, the brother who was closer to him than any other human being. Mitchell's face was gray and he looked as though someone had struck all the breath from his body. "Mitch?" he asked quietly. All the alarms in his body were clamoring furiously. "Where is Erin?"

"Gregg." Mitchell's voice was hoarse and cracked.

"Where's Erin?" Gregg said more firmly

now for it was becoming increasingly difficult for him to control the fear that was building in him.

"She's gone, Gregg, gone, . . ." said Jenny with a sob and covered her face with her hands. The word echoed through the quiet room.

"Gone where?" he asked. "Mother! Gone where?" He was holding his mother's shoulders and shook her gently.

"Stop it, Gregg," said Mitch. "I'll explain everything to you." He had control of himself now and Diane marveled at the composure of a man she knew was so deeply hurt.

"Mother, I think you'd better get some sleep. You too, father. You're both exhausted. Gregg will be here in the morning and he can tell you everything that happened. In the meantime, I shall explain everything to him. We'll talk in the morning and make our plans."

Thomas nodded and gently took Jenny by the arm, but she stopped in front of Mitchell and drew his head down to her and kissed him with tear-filled eyes. Then slowly, she went to Gregg and kissed him also. Turning away with dragging feet, she allowed Thomas to lead her to their room.

"Well, Mitch, what has happened?" questioned Gregg.

"You'd better read these first," Mitch answered and handed him the papers and the letter Erin had left for his parents. In his

pocket he kept the letter Erin left for him. Somehow, he couldn't seem to bring himself to let Gregg see it.

Gregg slowly sat down on the couch and began to read. The quiet ticking of the clock was the only sound in the room except the occasional rustling of the pages as Gregg turned them. He did not make a sound until he had finished, then the eyes he turned toward Mitchell were cold and filled with death. They were so fierce-looking that Diane cried out involuntarily.

"Charles Duggan. I should have killed him that time back in Ireland. It's time now to remedy my mistake."

"You ran across him in Ireland! You mean Erin knew him before?"

"Yes," said Gregg. Then he began to speak, slowly and quietly, telling Mitch exactly how Charles had attacked Erin.

"I knew," Mitchell said. "I had a feeling there was more than I'd been told between them."

"Where have they gone, Mitch? Do you know?"

"Erin told Diane that she . . . they had passage on a ship that left tonight at midnight."

At these words, Gregg's head snapped up and he cursed violently. "I passed a ship on the way in. Erin. . . . It was so close that I could have reached out and touched it." He

was on his feet now, striding back and forth across the carpet. His mind and body were too filled with violence for him to stand still.

Diane had never taken her eyes from Mitchell, and her father, who had remained beside her quietly, was watching her.

"Diane, I think we'd best leave now," he said softly to her so that Mitch and Gregg could not hear. He had known for a long time that Diane loved Mitchell and was trying to spare her any more pain.

She looked at him and smiled affectionately. "No, father, you go on home. Mitch might need me. I want to be here to help him. You do understand, don't you, papa?"

He sighed and looked at her with uncertain eyes. "Do you know what you're doing, child? You're leaving yourself open for more pain."

"I know, papa, but it's something I have to do. If he needs me, I want to be here."

He looked at her for awhile longer, then he smiled understandingly at her and kissed her cheek. Then he turned away and left.

"If we take the *Eagle* out on the morning tide, we'll only be a few hours behind them. The *Eagle's* a fast ship. There is a possibility we could catch up to them." Gregg was talking rapidly, more to himself than anyone else, but Mitchell was watching him closely.

"She said they were going back to Ireland, Gregg," Diane supplied, but Mitchell rose to his feet.

"Wait a minute," he interrupted. "Does it make any sense to you that a man as shrewd as he is would let Erin announce where they were going? No! That's just for our benefit. You see, he was probably sure she would tell someone, and if I . . . we decided to follow, that would lead us away from them, and after a few days we would never find them."

"Then where. . . ." Gregg began. Then he said softly, "America! Sure, you could get lost there very easily. It's a new country. Change your name and with money, there's no way anyone would ever find you."

Mitchell was nodding his head in agreement. "We'll take the *Eagle*, Gregg. First thing in the morning. That bastard is in for a big surprise. If we overtake them, good; if not, we'll be right behind them wherever they land."

"I'm going back to the dock and ask some questions," Gregg said. "Someone there will know the name of the ship and where she was headed." He was moving toward the door as he spoke. "Tell mother and father I'll be back before breakfast." He left the room closing the door behind him.

Mitch stood looking at the door for a long time, his face unreadable. Dian stood quietly watching the struggle going on inside of him. Slowly, she watched him win the battle for control. Then slowly, as if the movement were painful, he withdrew Erin's letter from

his pocket. He opened it and read it again slowly. Then he refolded it and began tearing it into pieces. She could feel his pain like a live being in the room. Then he turned to look at her, letting the pieces of the letter fall slowly from his hands.

"Oh, Mitch!" she cried softly and moved toward him. She looked up into his eyes. He looked like a child whose whole world had shattered. She wanted to gather him to her and hold him until the look went away. Instead, she reached out and touched his arm. He seemed to realize for the first time that she was there.

"Diane, . . ." he began.

"Don't, Mitch. I understand. Just remember I'm, here if you need me, will you? Try to remember I love you. When this is over, and you come back, I'll be here . . . waiting."

She reached up on tiptoe and kissed him gently on the cheek, then, before he could see the hot flood of tears, she turned away and left the room.

Gregg moved about the docks questioning everyone he saw until he found one who knew of the ship that had just left the harbor. Questioning him, he got the name of the ship and her destination. That did not seem to satisfy him. He asked questions about the weight and size of the ship and what she carried. How much sail she carried and what

her top speed was. Then, finally satisfied, he went to the *Golden Eagle* and told Captain Hardisty to unload as much of the cargo as he could.

The Captain was so flabbergasted to see him alive he began asking questions.

"We don't have time for questions now, sir. I'll answer them all when we're on our way. For now, we have to make the *Eagle* move like she's never moved before."

He left the ship and went back home to see Mitchell and explain his plans and their destination to his parents. Dawn was just brushing the first streaks of light on the horizon when Mitch and Gregg boarded the *Eagle* and she moved away from the dock.

Now Gregg answered all Captain Hardisty's questions and explained to him what happened. The Captain's rage was unsurpassable.

"The *Eagle* will run him to ground before he ever sees the shores of America," he promised vehemently. "And when we catch up with that . . . that, . . ." he blustered, not being able to name anything bad enough for how he felt.

The *Eagle* rose and fell with the waves, all her sails unfurled and catching a full wind. She had never moved faster. Gregg and Mitchell stood on the poop and watched the horizon for sight of a sail.

The hours went by: noon, evening, dusk. Both men were feeling the desperation now,

for in their minds was the same thought. If they didn't catch her tonight, Erin would have to spend another night on the ship with Charles Duggan.

Chapter 30

Charles slid the ring on Erin's trembling hand and she fought to hold back the tears. The Captain finished the short marriage ceremony. She heard only the murmur of his voice, then Charles was taking her by the shoulders and kissing her cold lips. She was congratulated by those present, then quickly, Charles whisked her away to their cabin. She stood in the middle of the cabin and turned to face him as he closed the door softly behind

him and locked it, slipping the key in his pocket. She licked her dry lips as the panic rose in her. He was looking at her and all the pent-up desire he'd ever had was there on his face.

"Well, Erin?" he said softly. "It seems we're back where we started. Only this time there will be a different ending."

"Charles . . . please . . . I . . ."

"You what, Erin? You're changing your mind? No, my sweet Erin, not this time. This time there's no one to stop us. This time, and for all the rest of time you belong to me."

"I wasn't going to say that, Charles."

"Then what, Erin?"

"Since we're married, and I have promised to stay with you, I will keep my bargain."

"You have no choice, Erin. When you cease to keep your bargain, the Cannons pay."

"Charles, can we not make this easier for us both? I will try, I swear, I will try, but just for tonight. . . ."

He chuckled and walked across the room to her side. He placed both hands on her waist and slowly drew her toward him until their bodies touched. Then he removed one hand and began to loosen the pins from her hair, letting it fall about her in a thick, black cloud. "Continue, my love," he said softly.

"There are so many nights ahead, Charles," she pleaded. "Must we, I mean, couldn't we wait . . . ?"

He buried his hands in the thick mass of

her hair and held her head between them. He took her mouth with his, forcing her lips to part, demanding, controlling, beating her down until she trembled in his hands. He felt the resistance leave her and gave a quick laugh.

"Wait! Do you know how many nights I waited? Lying in my bed imagining you in his arms. Your soft mouth, your beautiful white skin. No, Erin. There will be no waiting. Starting tonight, you are mine and I will wait no longer."

He stepped back from her and saw the fear in her face. Then slowly, he raised his hands and began to unbutton the dress she wore. She closed her eyes and gave a small, whimpering sound as he let it slide softly to the floor. The rest of her clothes followed and she stood before him, a vision of white skin, her soft, round breasts with the rosy nipples just showing through the strands of hair that fell over her shoulders. Gently, he let his hands run up over her hips and waist until he cupped one breast in each hand. He lowered his head and took one in his mouth gently, touching the nipple with his tongue until, in spite of her fear, her body responded. A tear slid from the corners of her eyes as he raised his head to look at her again. Again, he lowered his mouth to hers, moist with her tears. This time, the kiss was not violent but soft, savoring all the sweetness. He moved his

mouth on hers, parting her lips, exploring with his tongue the soft flesh of her lips. He was taking his time making up for all the nights he had dreamed of this. He took her hand and led her to the bed, then pushed her gently back until she was lying on it.

He stood over her, looking at her as if he wanted to absorb everything about her. Then slowly, with his eyes never leaving her, he removed his clothes. Then he was beside her and his mouth found hers again while his hands moved gently over her body, exploring, touching, seeking the softness of her that he soon found. Charles was not a novice with women and he slowly handled her until in spite of her emotions, her body began to warm under him. He gave a soft sound of triumph as he felt it stir to life and lifted her to him, holding her body tightly now and moving his mouth and hands over her. Then he was over her, lifting her so that he could enter, then moving into her deeply and strongly. She clutched his arms and gasped at the hard sureness of him as he possessed her fully and deeply, moving slowly, enjoying thoroughly the woman he had waited so long to possess.

After he slept, she had turned away and cried. Cried for the responses of her disobedient body that refused to be controlled by her heart. Cried for Gregg and the beauty of their lost love. He had made her body sing

and lift to meet him; now he was gone and she felt used and defeated.

Charles's soft voice interrupted her tears and she froze as she heard it. "Tears, Erin?" he asked softly against her ear. "I'll have no tears for the past, do you understand? That's part of our bargain also." He gently kissed her ear and his arms slid about her turning her back to him. "I guess I'll have to prove again that the past is gone and you belong to me."

He took her again, forcing her body to respond again with his expert, gentle touch and, afterward, held her tightly against him as if afraid she would fade away. After a long, long time, her eyes finally closed in exhausted sleep.

When she awoke, bright rays of sun were falling across her bed and she could feel the lift and fall of the ship as it moved. She closed her eyes again and listened to the sound of the water rushing by. Slowly, she let her mind drift back . . . back to the *Amy C.* . . . back to. . . . "No! No! I can not bear it," she thought. "I must realize that I have no choice in my life now and I will accept what has happened for as long as I can." The thoughts of the night before intruded themselves. She hated herself for allowing him to rouse even the slightest warmth in her. The disgust she felt for herself was matched only by her loathing for Charles and how he had de-

stroyed her life.

Another thought came creeping slowly into her mind. What if she no longer existed? What then? She gave the matter a moment's thought, then pushed it to the back of her mind. She knew she did not have the courage to do that. As long as there was life, there was hope for the future.

At that moment, the door opened and Charles entered. "Still in bed, Erin?" he laughed. "It is a lovely day. Do you want to join me on deck, or," he added softly, looking suggestively at her, "do you want me to join you there?"

She sat up quickly and realized she had only the blanket covering her. Her clothes lay on the chair. He must have picked them up and put them there. "Give me my clothes, please?" she asked.

He smiled slowly. "Come and get them. I want to look at you."

For a moment, she just looked at him but when he made a move toward her she rose from the bed quickly, dragging the blanket with her and holding it about her the best she could. She moved toward the chair but he put out an arm to stop her. She paused and looked up at him.

"Give me the blanket."

Their eyes met and she fought him. She would not do this. But his eyes were hard and unmoving and he slowly pulled the blanket

away from her.

"Why do you do this to me, Charles?" she whispered. "Do you get pleasure in humiliating me?"

He didn't bother to answer. He simply pulled her into his arms and caressed her gently. He kept her there for a long time until she lowered her head against his chest and began to cry softly in defeat. Then he moved her away from him.

"Get dressed, Erin. We're going on deck to enjoy this beautiful day. We'll be having lunch with the Captain. Don't say or do anything you'll regret. In fact, a little wifely devotion would be appropriate."

She nodded her head and went about washing and dressing. He sat on a chair and watched every move she made as though he could never get enough of looking at her. His watching made her so nervous she fumbled with her clothes and he moved to help her. She jumped back in fright and it made him angry. He grasped her arm and jerked her back to him and proceeded slowly to button the buttons on her dress. Without another word to her, he went to the door and opened it. She moved past him and saw the glitter of triumphant amusement in his eyes as she did.

They walked on the deck for awhile. He tucked her hand under his arm and engaged her in small conversation as though every-

thing between them were perfect. As far as the eyes that watched them could tell, they were a happy, newlywed couple.

They joined the Captain in his cabin for lunch. When Erin had first been introduced to him she had been so upset she had not paid him much attention. Now she looked closely at him.

He was about fifty, tall and rather slender of build. He looked directly at her with eyes of deep brown and she thought she saw a spark of sympathy in them for her obvious fright. He spoke to her gently and, for one, wild moment, she was tempted to tell him everything and ask for his help. Then she looked quickly at Charles and his eyes were filled with an amused malicious glitter, and he gave a slight shake of his head. She knew he realized exactly what she was thinking and was warning her again of what would happen if she spoke. The words she had been tempted to say died unborn and she lowered her head and pretended to eat to control the tears that burned her eyes.

The two men took up the conversation and it seemed to her like an eternity before the meal was over. She smiled obediently and thanked the Captain for the meal as Charles took her arm and they started back to the cabin. She walked as slowly as she possibly could, stopping often by the rail to look out over the blue water to the horizon.

Try as she might, she could not prolong any longer their destination and, as he opened the door to the cabin and let her pass him, she looked up into his eyes. Again, he was laughing at her helplessness.

"Stop it!" she said. "Stop playing with me. I'm trying to keep my part of the bargain, Charles. Why must you torment me?"

He took her by the shoulders and held her against him looking down into her eyes.

"Torment? You don't know what torment is yet, Erin. I've spent weeks, months in hell watching you with him. Nights that I could not sleep for wanting you and knowing you were lying with him. But you're going to make up to me for all that anguish, Erin, my sweet. Now I shall have you whenever I want you. I shall reach out my hand and you will be there, warm and willing. I may grow tired of you one day, but I doubt it. Until I do, you will be just as I desire you, and I desire you now, Erin, my lovely," he added huskily as his head bent over hers. He drew her against him to capture her lips in a searing, demanding kiss that left her breathless and shaken. He turned to the bed and began to remove his clothes. When he had done so, he lay back on the bed with his hands behind his head and smiled at her.

"Now you, Erin."

She swallowed the heavy constriction in her throat and began to remove her clothes.

"Slowly, Erin," he said. "I enjoy just

looking at you."

Her fingers slowed and she removed the last remnants and dropped them aside. Slowly, she walked to the side of the bed and he laughed aloud as he reached for her.

Later, after he had gone from the cabin for a word with the Captain, she lay on the bed, dry-eyed and quiet. Something in her was slowly dying and she had no way of stopping it. "How can I bear to live like this the rest of my life?" she thought. He was beating her down, destroying her pride and her will. She knew deep in her heart that she could not face the thought of endless days and nights of his subtle cruelty. Something began to pierce the black veil of her misery and her mind began to search for a means of escape.

When Charles returned, he seemed contented and sat down and talked to her for a few moments. She sat quietly on her chair watching him while he leaned back contentedly and lit a cigar. His eyes met hers, narrowed through the haze of blue-white smoke. It fascinated him the way her eyes shadowed and changed colors when he looked at her. It was the thing that had attracted him from the first.

"Do you know, Erin, you are the most beautiful woman I've ever known?" he said softly. "I must tell you of my plans for us so that you may be prepared."

"Prepared for what?" she asked.

"We are not going back to Ireland as you

so naively believed. We're heading for America, a new country with new opportunities. It will be impossible for anyone to ever trace us there, in case some careless gentleman should try. I've a business set up already and a new name for us. We are going to vanish completely. I intend to be an important man where we're going and I will need my beautiful, young wife at my side to help me."

He looked at her as her eyes grew larger and larger with the knowledge that it would be impossible for her to ever escape him. The reality of the situation was the last straw for her and she covered her eyes with her hands and wept. He allowed her to continue so for a few minutes until she completely accepted her defeat. Then he rose from his chair and slowly came around the table to her. He took her hands from her face and pulled her to her feet. She sagged away from him in fear, for his eyes were hungry and full of a deep, burning fire.

"And now, we begin to teach you, my love," he said. "There are things that I enjoy that you will have to learn, and now is the best time for your lessons to begin."

She closed her eyes as his arms closed about her and vowed to herself silently that she would find a way to either kill him or herself before much longer.

That night, Erin learned—to her distress and pain—things that she had never thought possible between a man and a woman, and it

hardened the core of deep, building hatred that had begun in her. She lay in frozen stillness, while he slept with his arm about her, and made her plans.

Chapter 31

It was early the next morning when Charles ordered her to dress and took her on deck for a walk. Her face was pale and her eyes shone large and luminous. She did not speak but he could feel the frustrated hatred in her and it amused him. When they came on deck there was a fresh, cool breeze blowing rather strongly. The first mate came up to them.

"Good morning, Mr. Duggan, Mrs. Dug-

gan. I'm afraid we're going to have to alter course for a few miles, sir. If you can see dead ahead on the horizon, there's quite a storm. We'd like to go around it if possible."

"Will it take us much longer?" questioned Charles.

"I should say no more than two days, sir," the young man answered.

Charles was about to agree when the lookout shouted from his high perch, "Sail ho!"

"Where away?" the first mate shouted.

"Three points off starboard, sir," came the answer.

As she watched the ship, Erin's heart leapt. Could it be Mitchell following them? Charles looked at the approaching ship and then at Erin. "It won't do any good to hope, Erin," he said quietly.

Then he turned to the first mate. "Do you recognize her?"

The mate sent for his glass and raised it to his eye. After watching the approaching ship for awhile, he lowered the glass and turned to Charles.

"She seems to be running light, as if she were trying to catch us."

"Do you know her, sir?" asked Charles firmly.

"Yes, sir. She's the *Golden Eagle*. That's a Cannon ship. Maybe we'd better shorten sail and come about and see what's wrong."

Charles turned when he heard the words

and a soft sound of pleasure from Erin.

"Where is Captain Pears?"

"On the bridge, sir."

"You keep a steady course until I've spoken with him," he said firmly. Then he took Erin's arm and practically dragged her toward the bridge.

"Captain Pears?"

"Yes, Mr. Duggan?"

"How long would it take us to overtake that storm ahead?"

The Captain looked at him in surprise. "About an hour, I imagine. But we will have no trouble skirting it, I assure you, sir."

"I don't want to skirt it. I want you to lose that ship that's following us, Captain. We can do that if we reach the storm before they reach us."

The Captain looked at him in shock and opened his mouth to protest. Charles interrupted him.

"This is my ship, Captain Pears, and you are under my orders. I want to reach that storm before that ship overtakes us. I want you to lose that ship. Do you understand?"

The Captain looked from Charles's cold, hard eyes to Erin's frightened ones. Again he opened his mouth to speak, then closed it abruptly. His face flushed and his eyes became clouded with anger but he ordered Charles's ship ahead at full speed directly into the heart of the storm.

Charles turned away from him and almost

dragged Erin back to their cabin. At the door, he looked down at her. "He may have been foolish enough to follow us, Erin, but he'll never have you. I'll see you at the bottom of the ocean first."

With these words, he pushed her into the cabin and closed the door. She could hear the key turn in the lock and she threw herself at the door pounding on it in panic. His footsteps receded and she was alone with her fear. She sat on the bed and listened as the wind began to pick up and the ship began to roll gently as the sea stirred beneath it.

On the *Golden Eagle*, both Mitch and Gregg had spotted the *Sea Nymph* at the same time. They stood together on the bridge with Captain Hardisty and watched as they began to overtake her.

Their eyes were so engrossed on the ship that they didn't notice the storm on the horizon ahead of it. It was Captain Hardisty who spotted it first and he cursed loudly.

"What's the matter?" asked Mitchell.

"Look! Dead ahead of the *Nymph*. A storm and she's headed right into it."

Gregg stared and his anger rose to a boiling fury. "Can we overtake it before it reaches the storm?"

"We're sure going to give him a hell of a race."

"But, Captain Hardisty, if we have all our sails on when we reach the storm, it will rip

us to shreds," said Mitchell.

Captain Hardisty turned to Mitch. "It's the ship or Erin, Mitchell," he said softly.

Mitchell looked at Gregg, whose white face and firmly compressed lips told of his determination as he said, "We don't haul down the sails until we either overtake them or hit the storm."

Both Mitch and Captain Hardisty were silent. Now they all watched closely this mad race.

The blackness of the storm overtook the *Sea Nymph* when the *Eagle* was within a thousand yards of her and Gregg watched with a grim face as the storm enveloped her and she disappeared. There was no question now that they would continue to follow as closely as the storm would allow, and the three men stood together on the bridge and felt the ocean begin to churn beneath their feet as the first, lashing wind whipped the rain across their faces. None of them would admit that the possibility of coming out of the holocaust in the same place as the *Sea Nymph* was practically impossible.

Captain Hardisty ordered down all the sails and the crew clambered rapidly to follow his orders, lashing them tightly to the spars. The storm had them completely in its power now as it tossed them about like feathers in a gale.

Erin had never been so afraid in her life.

She was locked in the cabin and tossed about as the ship rolled violently in the grip of the storm. She could hear the roar of the wind and the loud crackle of thunder.

"I don't want to die," she prayed wildly, as panic overtook her completely. She crawled into the bunk and curled into a small ball holding the pillow tightly in both arms. She would at that moment have accepted Charles's presence just to have another person to share her misery.

It seemed to her that the storm would last forever, as the hours dragged by. A soft whimper came from her lips as the violence continued. Then, when she thought she could bear it no longer, the key sounded in the lock and the door opened to admit Charles, wet and disheveled but smiling grimly.

He came to the bunk and looked down at her tear-stained face. "Don't be frightened, Erin. I'll stay here with you. We've lost all contact with the *Eagle* and chances of her finding us after this are almost impossible."

He said these words with grim satisfaction as he began to remove his wet clothes. Then he was beside her on the bed, pulling her into his arms. The combination of her fear and loathing for him finally erupted. She doubled her fists and began to fight him, crying out all her hatred in wild fury. He was surprised at her first attack but he quickly adjusted. It took him a few minutes even with his superior strength to get her under control.

He rolled over on top of her and held her down with the entire weight of his body.

"Go ahead, fight me, Erin. It makes no difference. I shall have you anyway and you know it."

She glared at him with all the hatred she could show and writhed fiercely in his arms. His mouth came down violently on hers and she could taste the salty taste of blood. His hands began to fumble with her clothes and, growing impatient, he ripped them from her and possessed her with a violence that made her cry out in anguish.

It seemed they lay together for hours. He would not release her from his embrace but merely held her and stroked her smooth skin. The sounds of the storm very gradually abated and Charles rose finally from the bed, dressed and left the cabin, locking the door firmly behind him.

Erin lay very still. Her body felt exhausted and bruised. She could still taste the bitter-sweet blood on her lips. She felt suddenly cold and lifted herself off the bunk and began slowly to dress. She wanted so desperately to believe the *Golden Eagle* would still be there, but the hope died when Charles reopened the door and smiled at her.

"Come along, Erin," he said.

She moved to his side and looked up at him. "Is it? . . ."

"There's no sign of the *Eagle*. We're on our way, Erin, and now they'll never be able to

find us."

She felt all the strength leave her body. There was no longer any fight left in her. She bowed her head and hot tears stung her eyelids. Charles lifted her chin with his hand and she looked into cold, brown eyes that harbored no pity. He smiled in recognition of her defeat. She was completely his now, and the sense of power over her and the realization of her complete surrender made him exuberant.

"We'll take a short walk on deck for some fresh air, then have a nice supper together, then. . . ."

She did not move and he took her elbow and guided her to the deck where she walked in listless silence beside him.

They had just entered the fringes of the storm when Mitchell turned to Captain Hardisty. "Bring her about," he shouted.

"Why?"

"Just bring her about quickly. I've got a better idea."

Captain Hardisty looked at Gregg, who was watching his brother.

"Bring her about, Captain Hardisty."

The Captain shrugged and gave the order. Within half an hour, they were skirting the fringe of the storm. The three men went to the Captain's cabin to talk.

"All right, Mitch, tell us what's going on," said Gregg.

Mitchell leaned back on his chair and smiled at Gregg. "I know where he's going."

"You do? How?" exclaimed Gregg, leaping to his feet.

"I just remembered how many times I shared a drink with Pears when I commanded the *Amy C.* I'd put it out of my mind but it just came back. He owns a home in America. They have their own harbor and dock. Where else could they disembark without anyone seeing?"

Gregg smiled for the first time in days. "Let them fight the storm, we'll skirt it and head directly there."

Mitch nodded his head.

"How long, Mitch?" Gregg asked quietly.

Now Mitch's eyes became clouded and his face lost its smile. "About a week."

"A week! Erin will be with him for another week!"

"Erin's got a lot of fortitude, Gregg. We'll find them and when we do, we'll make him pay for every second she spent there." He put his hand on his brother's shoulder, but Gregg's eyes were filled with the pain of remembrance.

Captain Hardisty caught Mitch's eye and motioned to him. "Show me on the chart, boy. We'll get there with all possible speed."

They left Gregg alone and walked to the corner of the cabin where the charts lay on the Captain's desk. Within a few minutes, the Captain knew exactly where they were

headed and was plotting their shortest course.

Mitchell walked out on the deck alone. It was the first time he had been alone with his thoughts since Gregg had come home. He knew now he would never say anything to Gregg about Erin and himself. There was no way, he knew, that he would ever have her while Gregg was alive.

He spent the next hour gathering together his thoughts and straightening out his mind. He would have to explain to Erin quickly that he understood before a real tragedy happened. He was so engrossed in his thoughts that it was some time before he realized he was not alone. Gregg stood in the shadows watching him.

"What's wrong, Mitch?" His voice came quietly from the shadows.

"Just nervous, I guess," he replied quickly. "Wondering if we'll beat them there or not."

"That's all?"

"What else could be wrong?"

"Mitch, I want you to know something. Before I left on that last voyage, I knew how you felt about Erin."

"You what?"

"I knew, just as I knew you would do nothing about it. I knew I could trust you, brother."

Mitchell sighed heavily. "You're right, Gregg. I care a great deal for Erin, just as I care a great deal for you. There's nothing

between Erin and me," he lied quietly and watched the shadows for Gregg's reaction. The flash of his smile in the dim light relieved him. "In fact, when we get home, I hope to ask Diane to marry me. Want to be my best man?"

Gregg smiled and extended his hand to his brother who took it firmly.

The next week for both men went so slowly their nerves were on edge, when the lookout shouted, "Land ho!"

They watched through the glass to see if the *Nymph* had arrived before them, but the harbor was empty. Gregg told Captain Hardisty to put him and Mitch ashore, then go a few miles up the coast and wait for them.

He did as they asked and soon they were pulling their boat ashore about half a mile from the dock. They made their way slowly so as not to arouse the suspicion of any onlookers. They seated themselves in a small tavern next to the dock and ordered drinks. Then they sat back to await the arrival of the *Sea Nymph* and her passengers.

Chapter 32

The *Sea Nymph* approached the harbor slowly, watching for any signs of the *Eagle's* presence. On board, Charles lowered the glass from his eye and chuckled happily. Erin stood at his side, her face white and drawn, her eyes like two purple shadows on her face.

"There we are, my dear. There should be a carriage waiting for us. Soon you will see the beautiful, new home I've built you."

"New prison you mean, Charles," she said numbly.

"Now, now, Erin. You shall have everything your heart desires from now on," he said.

"Everything my heart desires is dead at sea. You can give me nothing I want."

His face grew mottled with rage. He grasped her wrist and twisted until she moaned in pain. "Don't, please!"

"I thought I'd taught you obedience in the last few nights. I see we have to work harder at your lessons, my love," he said viciously, his voice quiet so only she could hear.

"Charles!" she gasped in pain as he held her arm tightly.

"I'm waiting for your apology, my dear."

"I . . . I'm sorry, Charles," she said in a broken voice. She remembered all too clearly the "lessons" of which he spoke. They had destroyed her pride and her will so that she trembled in fear each time he touched or spoke to her. She was filled with self-hate now for the way she had capitulated to him. But he was far superior to her in strength and, if she did not do as he said, he simply forced her and his brutality was worse than his lovemaking.

In the back of her mind was the grim determination to destroy herself when she had the first opportunity. He had kept a close watch on her on the ship. But she felt somehow, someday, he would lower his

guard and, when he did, she would take the opportunity.

The ship was pulling into the harbor now. "We'd best go below and prepare ourselves, Erin."

She followed him without a word and he watched her closely as she gathered her cloak and prepared to leave. His eyes never left her for a moment. He felt pleased with himself. It did not bother him one bit that she cringed in fear when he approached her. The nights they shared in this close cabin had been enjoyable for him and he intended to enjoy her for as long as he pleased. He went to her side and put his hand on the smooth, black coil of her hair. He had buried his face in the sweet, scented silk of it the night before. She stood still but he could see the flicker of her eyes and the throbbing of the pulse at her throat. He enjoyed this cat and mouse game immensely and was about to take her in his arms and prolong it when a knock sounded on the door. He turned away from her.

"Come in," he said.

The first mate opened the door. "We'll be landing in about fifteen minutes, Mr. Dugan."

"Thank you, we'll be ready."

Nodding his head, the man left the cabin.

"Fifteen minutes," Charles sighed in pretended frustration. "Not really enough time, is it, my love? I shall wait until we're home,

then I shall enjoy you at my leisure. Come along now," he said and took her arm.

They left the cabin and went up on deck. There they watched as the crew brought the ship in and tied her to the dock. When the gangplank was lowered, Charles and Erin walked down it together.

Mitchell and Gregg stood at an upstairs window of the tavern and watched them walk down. At the sight of her listless, pale face, Gregg gave an exclamation of anger and would have dashed out right then but for Mitchell's restraining hand.

"Easy, brother," he said softly. "Let them get inside when they find out the carriage they expected isn't there."

The two of them had waylaid the carriage on its arrival and it was safely hidden.

Now Charles stood looking around him in annoyance. "I told them to have the carriage here and be ready to pick us up." He strode up and down impatiently, then grasped Erin's arm. "Come, we'll go to the tavern. You can sit down while I find out what has become of that ignorant fool."

They walked to the tavern and Mitch and Gregg watched them come. Gregg watched Erin's face as she walked and felt the hurt and pain that emanated from it.

Stepping inside the tavern, Charles called out loudly for the innkeeper who shuffled out of the kitchen.

"Yes, sir?"

"I expected a carriage here. Have you seen it?"

"Carriage, sir? No, sir, I've seen no carriages. If you care to wait, I'll go and see what's come of it."

"Please do, and bring us a cool drink while we wait," he said arrogantly. They moved to a table and sat down opposite each other.

The innkeeper set two drinks down in front of them and Erin removed her cloak. Charles reached for his drink and his hand froze at the cool voice that spoke from behind him.

"You'll have need of a cool drink in hell, Duggan. And that's exactly where you're going."

Erin raised her eyes now at the sound of a voice she thought long dead. "Gregg! Oh, Gregg, you're alive!" she cried.

Charles had been watching her. Now he withdrew a gun from his coat and quickly stood up beside her, grasping her about the waist and holding it next to her head.

"Stay where you are, Cannon, or she dies," he said. "You may have outmaneuvered us but we'll be leaving you here. And this time, I'll make sure you're dead," he said coldly.

Gregg froze at the sight of the gun next to Erin's head and her large, fear-filled eyes. She knew Charles intended to kill him no matter what and, with a quick wrench away from him, she moved toward Gregg. She had pushed Charles as she did and as he bumped

into the table, the gun discharged. She saw Gregg's horrified face as she felt the pain in her head. Then blackness as she crumpled in a heap at Gregg's feet.

For one second, all three men, Charles, Mitchell and Gregg, stood in shock looking at her. Then with a low growl in his throat, Gregg leaped over Erin's body and grasped Charles by the throat. It was impossible for Mitch to get him away from Charles and the pounding of his fists on flesh could be heard loudly. When Mitchell finally got Gregg up from the mass of bloody pulp that was Charles Duggan, Gregg was almost sobbing and his fists were covered with blood.

They both moved to Erin's side and Gregg lifted her in his arms, holding her close and murmuring her name over and over.

Mitchell went for the carriage and Gregg held her as they rode up the coastline to where the ship was anchored.

Erin still had not regained consciousness when the ship unfurled its white sails and headed home.

After the ship's doctor examined and dressed the wound that had caught her on the side of the head, he informed the two nervous gentlemen who waited that she would be all right and to let her rest.

When Erin opened her eyes, she felt the old familiar feel of the ship rolling gently. Then everything flooded back and she sat up with a cry. As he had once before, Gregg had been

seated with his feet on the bunk and the chair tipped back. He had been catnapping since he had watched over her for days. The sound of her cry brought him up with a start and the chair came down with a thump. She looked at him now and he sat down beside her on the bunk.

"It seems this is where we started, my darling. Shall we begin again?" His eyes were warm and tender and washed over her with waves of love.

"Oh, Gregg! Oh, my love! I thought you were. . . ."

"Dead? I'm hard to kill, Erin. I had you to come back to. We have too much to do for anything to happen."

His arms enfolded her gently and his mouth took hers in a tender kiss that melted the hard lump of pain in her like snow in a summer sun. She felt cleansed and refilled with joy and thanksgiving. Now she wrapped her arms about his neck and kissed him feverishly. His eyes, cheeks, forehead, then again his mouth as he pulled her tightly against him. Now the words that came from him filled her and made her whole again.

It was several hours later after he had told her the whole story and about Sean and Tia. She alternately laughed and cried as he told her about Sean's wedding and passing her ship in the harbor. She kept reaching out her hand to touch him as though she still could not believe he was there. She could see the

love and longing in his eyes and she moved over to the corner of the bunk and turned down the blanket.

"Gregg," she said softly. "I need you so."

The hunger for her was deep in him like a pain and he removed his clothes and slipped down beside her. She closed her eyes as she felt the familiar, gentle warmth of his hands move over her. She took him inside her then, gently holding him within her, feeling the love and strength flow from him to her.

"We're going home, Erin, my love, and I'll never leave you again," he said against her hair as they lay together.

She sighed contentedly as she lay her head against his chest and listened to the firm beat of his heart.

They held each other as the ship moved slowly toward home, a new life, a new future together.

It wasn't until she awoke to the lulling rhythm of the ship and saw Gregg Cannon's deep-blue eyes that Erin was able to recall the events of the last few days. Her parents' sudden and tragic death and the lecherous Charles Duggan using his power to claim her body all seemed like a horrible dream.

But then like a knight in shining armor came Gregg, a man she hardly knew, rescuing her from a marriage she did not want, taking her aboard the Army C that was returning from Ireland to his English home.

When he smiled down into her eyes, Erin felt a wonderful warmth enclose her as though she were being held and protected. Stirred beyond reason, Gregg longed to have this beautiful child-woman more than he ever wanted anything before.

By the time they reached England they were truly man and wife, wrapped in a cocoon of passion and lust only lovers could know. But fate was determined to put their love to the test, taking Gregg on a long and dangerous ocean voyage that would threaten his life—but only deepen his desire for

ERIN'S ECSTASY